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## Suzanne Rodriguez

**Wild Heart: A Life**  
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### **What prompted you to write about Natalie Clifford Barney?**

My interest in Barney grew out of my fascination with 1920s Paris — the greatest gathering in history of cutting-edge writers, musicians, and artists, from Picasso and Matisse to Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Djuna Barnes, Scott & Zelda Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Man Ray, James Joyce, and ad infinitum. Natalie's name kept popping up, since most of the 1920s set attended her Salon. I had the vague impression that she was scandalous, but nobody ever came right out and said why. One day I finally saw a circa 1900 photograph of Natalie — the one where's she's stretched across a white bearskin rug wearing knickers. I thought she looked amazingly contemporary, and couldn't believe she'd been born in 1876. The book detailed a few of her scandals, and I finally understood the veiled references to Natalie in memoirs of the time. I'm a fan of people with strong convictions, so Natalie was a shoo-in to fascinate me. I found two early biographies about her and learned some of the facts about her life. However, neither book helped me to "know" Natalie or explained how she made the giant leap from Victorian America to ruling Parisian literary life. Eventually I came to realize that if I were to ever grasp how and why Natalie defied society to become who she was, then I would have to find out for myself. And so I did.

### **Which of Natalie Barney's writings would you recommend to a first-time reader of her work? Why?**

A good intro to Natalie's thinking and writing is *A Perilous Advantage: The Best of Natalie Clifford Barney*, edited by Anna Livia: It's out of print, but it can be easily found at used online bookstores. Personally, I think Natalie's most important book was *Pensées d'une Amazone*, published in 1920.

### **Was Natalie considered an American expatriate by the French at the time of her death, or had she been fully integrated into Parisian society during in the decades she lived there?**

Natalie had been definitely integrated into Parisian society in many ways, and early on. On the other hand, she was always viewed — despite her exquisite grasp of French language, manners, and mores — as an American. She liked it that way, and felt that she had distilled the best of both worlds into her being. She did, no doubt about it, manage to combine French finesse, politesse, and charm with Yankee forthrightness, practicality, and can-do spirit.

### **Why do you think so many of Natalie's relationships involved obsessive, all-consuming passions? Do you think it says more about Natalie or about the women attracted to her brilliant and intense personality?**

The notion of conquest and everything it entailed gave great meaning to Natalie's life, offering her a good deal of fun and mental stimulation in the process. Each separate conquest involved its own unique warfare — analysis, strategic planning, well-aimed salvos, heavy bombardment when needed, and, finally, triumph on the battlefield. After that Natalie's adversary/lover became an ally, and she herself began the search for new battles.

Born one hundred years later, who knows? Natalie might have enrolled at West Point and become the Army's first female Chief of Staff.

### **Can you think of a contemporary figure analogous to Natalie Barney in terms of her influence on culture, literature, and sexuality? How would you measure Barney's presence against that of Gertrude Stein, another expatriate who seems to invite frequent comparison?**

Natalie was a product of her times, so it's difficult to arrive at an analogous contemporary figure. But one person who comes to mind is Madonna: Through the 90s she seemed to always be shaking up cultural notions of womanhood. It's hard to be shocking in the modern world, but Madonna managed to startle and even shock people frequently. Like Natalie, I think Madonna has enjoyed her "bad girl" image. Unlike Natalie, I can't say that Madonna has had much impact on literature.

As for Stein, she and Natalie weren't the rivals people seem so bent on making them. They were friends — wary friends, it's true, but friends nonetheless. Gertrude attained much more prominence among contemporary Americans and subsequent literary historians than Natalie. Perhaps one reason for this is that Gertrude was much "safer" than Natalie. Gertrude wasn't seductive. She had a big, pillowy body — a comforting body. Her contemporaries often likened her appearance to that of a man. Most people didn't look at Gertrude and think about sex. Natalie was just the opposite. In her youth she was willowy, beautiful, and aggressively sexual. Even when she put on bulk in middle age, she was still a good-looking woman and, if anything, was even more aggressively sexual. Most people, men and women, thought about sex when they looked at Natalie. That's risky; the opposite of Gertrude's safe. Being around Natalie could make people confront parts of themselves that, perhaps, they didn't want to confront; it was much safer to be around Gertrude. Ergo, it was much safer to write about Gertrude.

### **In *Wild Heart* you write that the Académie des Femmes was one of Natalie Barney's major achievements. What did it accomplish? Do you think it forced the hand of the then all-male Académie Française and prompted its admission of women?**

It's important to remember that Natalie honored male and female writers in an even-handed manner at her Salon for 60 years. However, in 1927 she made a point of celebrating women writers when she turned her Salon into the "Académie des Femmes" for about a year. She intended her own Académie as a rebuke to the all-male Académie Française, which did not then accept female writers. At meetings of the Académie des Femmes, men were welcome to enjoy the festivities and celebrate the female guest of honor. Inviting men was a clever move, putting them in the position of having to honor and celebrate, en masse — just as they did for one another — the

accomplishments of women writers. This had never happened before.

And no, I don't think Natalie's Académie influenced the Académie Française to admit women. They didn't do that until 53 years later, when, in 1980, they finally admitted a woman to membership: Natalie's friend, Marguerite Yourcenar.

**What is your next project?**

Like Natalie, I like to keep things interesting for myself. The book I'm working on now has absolutely nothing to do with France, Paris in the 1920s, or any of the other things I've written about in the past. I'm tackling a little-known but vital and very exciting part of American history.