



Wild Heart: A Life

By Suzanne Rodriguez
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Introduction

Charismatic, brilliant, and beautiful, the American writer Natalie Clifford Barney, who lived in Paris for most of her long life, is best known for three things: her Left Bank literary salon, often acknowledged as the most important of the twentieth century; her books of epigrams about life, love, and the nature of womanhood; and a liberated approach to sex that she refused to cloak, even in the midst of the Victorian era.

Born to great wealth in 1876 and raised in Washington, D.C., and Bar Harbor, Maine, Barney was expected to marry well and lead the conventional life of a privileged society woman. But Natalie wasn't interested in marriage and made no secret of the fact that she was attracted to women.

Raised by a nonconformist and artistic mother -- the painter Alice Pike Barney -- Natalie developed an early interest in poetry and the arts. Moving to Paris at the century's turn, she plunged into the city's vibrant social and literary scene, quickly becoming known among the young, cutting-edge literati as "the rarest and most intelligent woman" of her time. She was equally renowned as a notorious seductress, one who effortlessly conquered the hearts of women and the minds of men. The story of her first notorious love affair -- with Liane de Pougy, the most sought-out courtesan of Belle Époque Paris -- was transformed by Liane, with Natalie's assistance, into a bestselling 1901 roman à clef. Natalie's lovers continued to write about her for decades -- sometimes impishly (Colette), or with brutal honesty (Lucie Delarue-Mardrus), or with a disturbing mixture of anger, worship, and grief (the tragic poet Renée Vivien). Men, including would-be lovers such as Remy de Gourmont or Bernard Berenson, tended to write of Barney with admiration, even reverence. Ultimately, her powerful salon and compelling personality attracted the greatest figures of twentieth-century arts and letters, including Edna St. Vincent Millay, Isadora Duncan, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Truman Capote.

A dazzling literary biography, *Wild Heart: A Life* is the story of a true rebel who came of age at a time when rebels weren't admired -- particularly if they were women -- and who has since become an icon to many others. Set against the backdrop of two different societies, Victorian America and Belle Époque Europe, *Wild Heart* beautifully captures the richness of their lore.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you characterize the relationship between Alice Pike Barney and Albert Barney? What roles did Henry Morton Stanley and Oscar Wilde play in their marriage? To what extent were Natalie Barney's views on marriage and life influenced by her parents' relationship?
2. How do you think Natalie Barney's ebullient sexuality was perceived by her contemporaries? How would you describe her attitudes toward her many lovers? Did you find her chronic infidelity emblematic of her free spirit, evidence of her unwillingness to commit to love, or something entirely different?
3. What role did lesbianism play in Natalie's own writing? Did it surprise you to learn that lesbian attachments were so accepted in France during Barney's lifetime? How would you compare French attitudes with those expressed by Natalie's American peers, such as her Bar Harbor neighbors and the author Edith Wharton?
4. How did Natalie's affair with Liane de Pougy transform her? In your opinion, was their relationship the cause for Natalie's sudden celebrity?
5. Do you think that the salon culture of Belle Époque Paris could exist in America today? Why or why not? What aspects of Parisian society enabled Natalie to ascend to fame?
6. What was your opinion of Natalie Barney's relationship with Pauline Tarn (a.k.a. Renée Vivien)? How did each woman serve as muse in the other's poetic development? What did you think of Natalie's efforts to win back her love?
7. Why was Natalie called an Amazon? How did Remy de Gourmont factor in the creation of this identity? How did this persona factor into the duality that defined her personality?
8. What kind of feminism did Natalie embody in her lifetime? Why did she found the Académie des Femmes? What influences did Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Sylvia Beach have on her life in Paris?
9. In *Souvenirs Indiscrets*, which she published at the age 84, Natalie Barney remembers friends and lovers from her early years in Paris. She continued to acquire new lovers well into her eighties, all the while maintaining her longstanding attachment to Romaine Brooks. Would you describe Brooks as the love of her life? Why or why not?
10. What influence did Natalie Barney have on her immediate society? How did her radically progressive approach and her confessional tendencies in her writing leave their mark on the larger literary community?

About Suzanne Rodriguez

Suzanne Rodriguez is the author of *Found Meals of the Lost Generation*, a social history of Americans in Paris in the 1920s. *Wild Heart: A Life* was a 2003 Lambda Literary Award finalist for best biography and a nominee for the 2003 Judy Grahn Nonfiction Award. Rodriguez

lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she is at work on her next book.