

# Wild Heart: A Life, Natalie Clifford Barney and the Decadence of Literary Paris

by Suzanne Rodriguez



## About the Book

Born in 1876, Natalie Barney -- beautiful, charismatic, brilliant, and wealthy -- was expected to marry well and lead the conventional life of a privileged society woman. But Natalie had no interest in marriage and made no secret of the fact that she was attracted to women. Brought up by a talented and rebellious mother -- the painter Alice Pike Barney -- Natalie cultivated an interest in poetry and the arts. When she moved to Paris in the early 1900s, she plunged into the city's literary scene, opening a famed Left Bank literary salon and engaging in a string of scandalous affairs. For the rest of her long and controversial life, Natalie Barney was revered by writers for her generous, eccentric spirit and reviled by high society for her sexual appetite. In the end, she served as an inspiration and came to know many of the greatest names of twentieth-century arts and letters -- including Marcel Proust, Colette, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Isadora Duncan, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Truman Capote.

## Discussion Guide

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?

## Author Bio

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.

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