

Plagued by Fire: The Dreams and Furies of Frank Lloyd Wright, by Paul Hendrickson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. x, 600 pp. Illustrations, essay on sources, bibliography, index, notes. \$35.00 hardcover.

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Had today's we-are-the-truth media been around to assess Frank Lloyd Wright's situation in 1910, there may never have been Taliesin, the Imperial Hotel, Fallingwater, the Usonian houses, Johnson Wax, Price Tower or the Guggenheim Museum. It is a fashion now to find heroism in the common person, and this is as it should be. But the associated need to tear down the extraordinary genius of earlier years is truly unfortunate.

Nevertheless, to reduce "a haughty man" is what Paul Hendrickson wants to do. In *Plagued by Fire*, he tells stories about Wright—stories that he assures us are "the real story." The real story, he says, "is grainer, ruder" (19) than the same story as we have so often heard it told. The real story "has about it the drip-drip-drip of reducing a haughty man to his near-nakedness" (19). In earlier books, Hendrickson investigated Marion Post Walcott, Robert McNamara, and Earnest Hemingway. In this book, he tells the real story of Frank Lloyd Wright.

The book's dust jacket hyperbole bills *Plagued by Fire* as "a breathtaking biography that will change the way we understand the life, mind, and work of the premier American architect." The story has little to do with architecture. Hendrickson focuses not on Wright's successes but on the tragedies in his life: infidelities, ugly divorces, devastating fires, inconceivable murders and deaths. His concern is with the low points of a valiant, exuberating life, and on nearly every page he speculates about Wright's psychological make-up. His mission, in his own words, is the "historical-cum-imaginative reconstruction of what it must have been like" (19).

What was it like for Wright as the child of bickering parents in Richland Center? What was it like when Wright sought his first job in Chicago? When he married and fathered six children? When later his lover was killed by a mad servant who then burned Wright's house down? When his daughter and son-in-law were killed in a strange automobile accident?

What was it like? Hendrickson speculates, suggesting to his reader that his guess is far more informed, sympathetic, and knowing than the reader's guess could ever be. His facts are carefully selected to prove his point. "What would it have been like for the kids in those two

households?" he queries, referring to Wright's affair with Mamah Cheney in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1909 (172). His answer comes from the 1976 *Family Memories of Four Sisters*, a source he describes as an "obscure book, a family memoir" written by a "member of the Belknap family, who lived next door to the Cheneys" (172). The author, Margaret Belknap Allen, Hendrickson writes, "got some things factually wrong in the several pages she devoted to Wright and Mamah," adding quickly, "although perhaps she remembers this precisely, for it seems the kind of memory that would have burned into her brain cells" (172). To make his case against Wright, he offers as evidence Belknap's secret as she remembered it some sixty-seven years after it happened: "we children [would] look down into the Cheney living room below to watch the two of them making love" (172). What would "making love" have looked like to a ten-year-old in 1909? How many Wright-Cheney stories had Belknap heard in the intervening sixty-seven years? Is her story here no more than the whopper the present public wants to hear? The evidence is sketchy, yet for Hendrickson, it serves as an indication of Wright's callous neglect and the corrupting influence his careless attitude and perverted character had on the young.

The merit of the book? Hendrickson brings together Wright's great tragedies. Assuming we ignore the author's overly judgmental conclusions, the book presents us with the great depth of Wright's extraordinary life. *Plagued* is a book of anecdotes, real stories seldom proven true; yet the stories give us some idea of the social context in which Wright worked and some idea of the norms of the time that he challenged. Ignoring Wright's triumphs, the stories Hendrickson tells in *Plagued by Fire* illuminate the tragedies that Wright's genius overcame, and in doing so, they underscore "overcoming" as essential to his character.

Not mentioned in the book, Wright built ten buildings in Iowa. Taliesin, Wright's home in southwest Wisconsin and the site of much of the drama that makes up Hendrickson's tale, is sixty-six miles from Dubuque. Go there. You'll find that their stories are every bit as good as Hendrickson's.

The Merchant Prince of Black Chicago: Anthony Overton and the Building of a Financial Empire, by Robert E. Weems, Jr. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020. xii, 210 pp. \$24.95 paperback.

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