

agents, Ikem tells a group of students that the writer's role is to give "headaches," not "prescriptions." Facing complexity is always a headache, but the alternative, Achebe shows, is to accept the death of conscience.

MANY MASKS: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright
by Brendan Gill
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America's best-known and most imitated architect was also a liar, a philanderer, a self-promoter, an unscrupulous businessman—in short, a charlatan. Can genius excuse such failings? Biographer Gill, who met Wright during the last decade of his life (1867–1959), seems to suggest that it can.

Wright, one learns, reinvented his Wisconsin childhood, changed his name and birth date for his autobiography, and even glossed over the truth about his education (bad grades, no high school diploma, barely three terms of college at the University of Wisconsin, Madison). He habitually took all credit for buildings designed during his apprenticeship to Chicago architects Louis H. Sullivan and Dankmar Adler; and after he went on his own, tossing off house after newfangled house in the Chicago suburbs, he even took credit for his former firm's design of the Seattle Opera House—which had never been built!

Wright's houses and buildings (e.g., the majestically impractical S.C. Johnson Wax Co. in Racine, Wisconsin) stand in 36 states and reflect his eclectic borrowings—from Bauhaus to Tudor to Japanese pagoda. All make strong statements. Indeed, says Gill, Wright would have despised the current architectural fad for "contextualism." His strange "Usonian" or "Prairie" houses bullied their neighborhoods with their "carports," massive chimneys, and wide-eaved low roofs. Wright never acknowledged professional mistakes. When Dallas retailer Stanley Marcus complained that there were no bedrooms in his house, Wright replied, "In your climate you don't need bedrooms."

He rarely apologized for his personal life either, even though he wreaked havoc on his family and the various women who threw themselves under the train of his affection (including his first mistress, who died in 1914 in the fire that engulfed his Taliesin home in Spring Green, Wisconsin).

Gill has provided readers with an amusing glimpse behind Wright's masks. But if finally we are less charmed by Wright than Gill seems to be, it may be because we never met the man.