During a career that spanned 72 years and more than 300 projects, Frank Lloyd Wright won international acclaim as an "organic" architect.

Establishing his practice in a house he named "Taliesin" ("shining brow" in Welsh) in Spring Green, Wis., Wright attracted dozens of devoted students, wrote hundreds of articles and books and designed legendary residences and public buildings from Falling Water to the Guggenheim Museum.

A self-proclaimed iconoclastic genius, he once testified in court that he was the world's greatest architect. "I was under oath," he explained later, with a straight face.

With open floor plans, very few ornaments, and an affinity with their surroundings, Wright's "prairie houses" were built to establish or restore family ties that had been frayed by modern stresses. But Wright himself was not your typical family man.

A critic of aesthetic, social, and moral conventions, he refused to restrain his out-sized sexual appetites, providing novelist T.C. Boyle with plenty of material. He imagines Wright's life from the vantage point of his mistress, Mamah Cheney, and his three wives: Kitty Tobin, Maude Miriam Noel and Olgivanna Milanoff.

Boyle is a superb stylist and storyteller. He has an affinity for historical fiction and seeks to do for (and to) Wright what he did for (and to) John Harvey Kellogg, the breakfast cereal king, and Alfred Kinsey, the sex researcher, in his earlier novels, "The Road to Wellville" and "The Inner Circle."

He doesn't quite pull it off. To be sure, "The Women" has many memorable moments, as the novel moves backward in time toward the 1914 tragedy in Taliesin in which Cheney and her two children died. For some reason, however, Boyle consciously subverts his own narrative.

His fictional character, Tadashi Sato, the ostensible author of novel, we learn, has an axe to grind against Wright, his former mentor at Taliesin. Sato never met many of the women about whom he writes.

Another Boyle creation, Seamus O'Flaherty, Sato's co-author, translator and heretofore unpublished grandson-in-law, "flexes his imagination" in the text as well and uses locutions that seem "rather odd."

The two did not discuss "in any depth" the emotional and sexual attraction between Wright and his women, and, Sato-O'Flaherty-Boyle acknowledges, "We strive only for a closely invested brand of verisimilitude."

Though at times amusing, this postmodern ploy has grown stale. Sophisticated readers know, or should know, by now, that the story of a life is not a life, it is a story. And that whether the form is fiction or nonfiction, narratives about the past are, inevitably, selective and subjective.

Despite the multiple layers of "narrativity" in "The Women," the main characters remain rather one-dimensional.

Wright is a charismatic cad. "Striding into the kitchen in his hat, coat, and scarf, bringing the scent of the outdoors with him and all the fierce joy of his uncontainable energy," he is "so enveloped in the cloud of his genius" that he doesn't see -- nor care about -- the needs of others.
For all their differences, Wright's women -- an unworldly Midwestern hausfrau; a Southern belle with an addiction to drugs; a feminist; and a ballet dancer from Montenegro -- barely exist outside the gravitational force field of the great man.

Once they've found Mr. (W)Right, it seems, at least in this novel, they relinquish everything else in their lives to hold on to him.

"The Women" ends with an act of retribution. For "one hard moment," Wright sees "how wrong he'd been, how cruel and selfish."

But you know he'll get over it and will present himself to another married woman, and yet another, "in half-profile, staring out across the continent and the sea, too," as the genius who needs to love and be loved.

"THE WOMEN:
A NOVEL"
By T.C. Boyle
Viking ($27.95)

T.C. Boyle, above, speaks at 7 p.m. Friday at the Oakmont Carnegie Library, 700 Allegheny River Blvd., sponsored by Mystery Lovers Bookshop. Tickets are $31, which includes a copy of "The Women." Call 412-828-4877 for reservations.

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