

## *The Aviator's Wife* by Melanie Benjamin (Bantam Books, 2013)

*The New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestseller

When Anne Morrow, a shy college senior with hidden literary aspirations, travels to Mexico City to spend Christmas with her family, she meets Colonel Charles Lindbergh, fresh off his celebrated 1927 solo flight across the Atlantic. Enthralled by Charles's assurance and fame, Anne is certain the aviator has scarcely noticed her. But she is wrong. Charles sees in Anne a kindred spirit, a fellow adventurer, and her world will be changed forever. The two marry in a headline-making wedding. In the years that follow, Anne becomes the first licensed female glider pilot in the United States. But despite this and other major achievements, she is viewed merely as the aviator's wife. The fairy-tale life she once longed for will bring heartbreak and hardships, ultimately pushing her to reconcile her need for love and her desire for independence, and to embrace, at last, life's infinite possibilities for change and happiness. [Courtesy of Amazon.com]

### How to Use this Discussion Guide

All art—whether literary or visual—arises from the context of its time. Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts is what makes the **MFAH Book Club** unique.

This discussion guide features questions about broad themes directly related to Melanie Benjamin's *The Aviator's Wife*, as well as questions about works of art in the Museum's collections and exhibitions.

Read the book, discuss some or all of the questions with your group, and then reserve an **MFAH Book Club** tour.

### How to Book an MFAH Book Club Tour

For book clubs and other groups of six or more confirmed participants, tours related to Melanie Benjamin's *The Aviator's Wife* are available on select days and times January 2–April 30, 2016. Tours are led by Museum docents and feature excerpts from the book and discussion about works on view at the Museum.

For more information, visit [mfah.org/bookclub](http://mfah.org/bookclub). Please e-mail [bookclub@mfah.org](mailto:bookclub@mfah.org) with any questions.

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## In the Beginning: Anne & Charles

Anne's father says, "And there's Anne. Reliable Anne. You never change, my daughter." (p. 11). Does Anne change over the course of this novel? How?

"Had there ever been a hero like him, in all of history?" (p. 16) Anne starts her description of Charles with hero worship, comparing him to Columbus and Marco Polo. Why does she feel this way?

When you close your eyes and picture Anne, what is she wearing? Which one of these dresses (shown below) in the Museum's exhibition *Deco Nights: Evenings in the Jazz Age*, on view December 12, 2015, through June 5, 2016, matches your vision—and why?



From left: Callot Soeurs, *Tea Gown*, French, c. 1916, façonné velvet, lace, sequins, and beads, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Costume Institute Founders' Fund, 86.612.

House of Lanvin, *Dance Dress*, French, 1921, voided velvet and silk crepe, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Costume Institute Founders' Fund, 86.633.

Mariano Fortuny, "*Delphos*" *Tea Gown*, Italian, c. 1910–39, pleated China silk, glass beads, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Janie C. Lee, 87.230.

Is Charles an insular character himself, whether by personality or by being forced into a "celebrity bubble?"

How does Anne's relationship with her family change after she marries Charles?

## Aviation: Adventure & Accomplishment

The title of this book is, of course, *The Aviator's Wife*. Do you think that's how Anne views herself upon marrying Charles? Do you think she sees that as a role she's playing, or as a defining characteristic of who she is? Does it change over the course of the book?



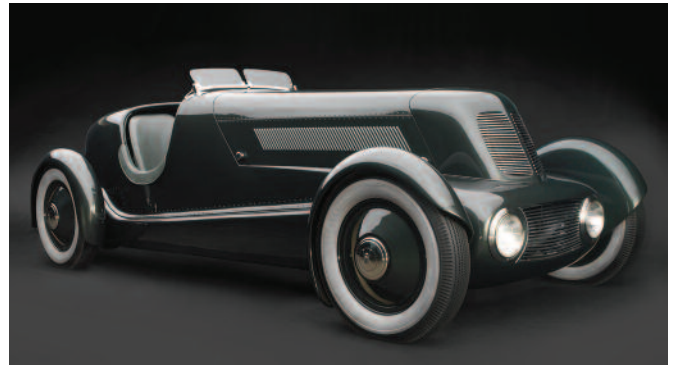
In what ways does Elsie Driggs's painting *Aeroplane* (shown left), in the Museum's American galleries, epitomize American aspirations during the late 1920s and 1930s?

What do you think flying represents to Charles? Besides his accomplishments as an aviator, did Charles achieve anything else?

What do you think flying represents to Anne? How does it compare with writing for her? Which do you think is more important to Anne?

Elsie Driggs, *Aeroplane*, 1928, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 2006.297. © Merriman Gatch

The Museum's exhibition *Sculpted in Steel: Art Deco Automobiles and Motorcycles, 1929–1940*, on view February 21 through May 30, 2016, features vehicles from the same time period as the Lindberghs' flights. Look at *Edsel Ford's Model 40 Special Speedster*. What about its design implies motion and speed? How does this relate to aviation?



In what ways does Charles push Anne beyond her comfort zone? Could this be one reason Anne admires Charles? Or is this a cause of resentment?

From *Sculpted in Steel: Art Deco Automobiles and Motorcycles, 1929–1940*: Designed by Edsel Ford, designed by Eugene T. "Bob" Gregorie, made by Ford Aircraft Division, *Edsel Ford's Model 40 Special Speedster*, 1934, automobile, courtesy of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House.

Look at the two photographs below of Charles and Anne. Which do you think captures their true personalities?



Far left: Unknown photographer, *Anne Lindbergh and C. A. Lindbergh in Cockpit*, August 1931, vintage postcard photograph, private collection.

Left: Unknown photographer, *Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh*, February 3, 1934, vintage gelatin silver print, matte finish, private collection.

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## Public Life Versus Private Life

### Public Life

How would you react to the scrutiny by the press that Anne and Charles endured? Would you want to be famous if it meant being constantly under the microscope?

What happened during “the events of ‘32”? How do Charles and Anne react differently in public versus in private?

Discuss Charles’s political views regarding Nazi Germany. How did Anne react? Did Charles’s perspective change? If so, why?

### Private Life

What rights to privacy do you think a public figure should have? Does it go against being a public figure to get to decide what parts of one’s life stay private?

Secrets abound in this book. Discuss the following:

- Anne’s family keeps a secret about Anne’s brother, Dwight, from Charles.
- Anne’s sister, Elizabeth, keeps a secret about herself from everyone.
- Anne and Charles keep a secret from their children.
- Charles keeps a secret from everyone.

Could you have kept any of these secrets?

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## In the End: Anne & Charles



“Had there ever been a hero like him, in all of history?” (p. 16) How does Anne’s opinion evolve as she comes to know him better? How did your opinion of Charles Lindbergh evolve through Anne’s story?

Do you think Charles and Anne were in love? Why or why not? Did that change over time?

Look at Elie Nadelman’s sculpture, *Tango* (shown left), in the Museum’s American galleries. Is this representative of the Lindberghs’ marriage? Why or why not?

Do you think Charles was a good husband? Do you think Anne was a good wife?

Elie Nadelman, *Tango*, c. 1918–24, cherry wood and gesso, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meredith Long, 96.1751.A..B. © Estate of Elie Nadelman

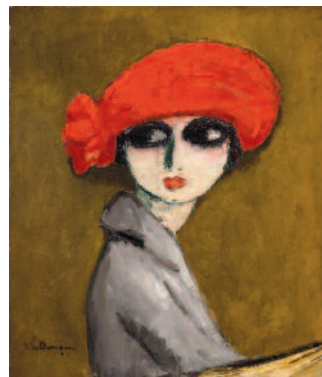
Were Anne and Charles good parents? Which one of the two images (shown right) from the Museum’s collection best represents your vision of Anne, and why?

One of the recurring themes is how Anne will choose to remember Charles. How does her thinking change through the novel?

If you could ask Anne a question, what would it be? If you could ask Charles a question, what would it be?

Right: Kees van Dongen, *The Corn Poppy*, c. 1919, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 98.279. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Far right: Charles W. Hawthorne, *American Motherhood*, 1922, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase funded by the Houston Friends of Art, 27.8.



## Author Biography



Melanie Benjamin  
(Photo by Todd Rennels)

Melanie Benjamin grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she pursued her first love, theater. After raising two sons, she decided to pursue a writing career. After writing a parenting column for a local magazine, and winning a short story contest, Melanie published two contemporary novels under her real name, Melanie Lynne Hauser: *Confessions of Super Mom* (2005) and *Super Mom Saves the World* (2007). She then turned to historical fiction. Before *The Aviator's Wife*, she wrote the national bestseller *Alice I Have Been* (2010), about Alice Liddell, the inspiration for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb* (2011), about 32-inch-tall Lavinia Warren Stratton, a star during the Gilded Age. Melanie's next novel, *The Swans of Fifth Avenue: A Novel*, about "the scandalous, headline-making, and enthralling friendship between literary legend Truman Capote and peerless socialite Babe Paley," will be released in late January 2016. She lives in Chicago with her husband, and near her two grown sons.

*"Security in a relationship lies neither in looking back to what it was,  
nor forward to what it might be,  
but living in the present and accepting it as it is now."  
~ Anne Morrow Lindbergh ~*

### Acknowledgements

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