



Under the Wide and Starry Sky: A Novel

By Nancy Horan

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Look for special features inside. Join the Random House Reader's Circle for author chats and more.

From Nancy Horan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Loving Frank*, comes her much-anticipated second novel, which tells the improbable love story of Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson and his tempestuous American wife, Fanny.

At the age of thirty-five, Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne has left her philandering husband in San Francisco to set sail for Belgium—with her three children and nanny in tow—to study art. It is a chance for this adventurous woman to start over, to make a better life for all of them, and to pursue her own desires. Not long after her arrival, however, tragedy strikes, and Fanny and her children repair to a quiet artists' colony in France where she can recuperate. Emerging from a deep sorrow, she meets a lively Scot, Robert Louis Stevenson, ten years her junior, who falls instantly in love with the earthy, independent, and opinionated “belle Americaine.”

Fanny does not immediately take to the slender young lawyer who longs to devote his life to writing—and who would eventually pen such classics as *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In time, though, she succumbs to Stevenson's charms, and the two begin a fierce love affair—marked by intense joy and harrowing darkness—that spans the decades and the globe. The shared life of these two strong-willed individuals unfolds into an adventure as impassioned and unpredictable as any of Stevenson's own unforgettable tales.

Praise for *Under the Wide and Starry Sky*

“A richly imagined [novel] of love, laughter, pain and sacrifice . . . *Under the Wide and Starry Sky* is a dual portrait, with Louis and Fanny sharing the limelight in the best spirit of teamwork—a romantic partnership.”—*USA Today*

“Powerful . . . flawless . . . a perfect example of what a man and a woman will do for love, and what they can accomplish when it’s meant to be.”—*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

“Spectacular . . . an exhilarating epic about a free-spirited couple who traveled the world yet found home only in one another.”—*Booklist (starred review)*

“Horan’s prose is gorgeous enough to keep a reader transfixed, even if the story itself weren’t so compelling. I kept re-reading passages just to savor the exquisite wordplay. . . . Few writers are as masterful as she is at blending carefully researched history with the novelist’s art.”—*The Dallas Morning News*

“A classic artistic bildungsroman and a retort to the genre, a novel that shows how love and marriage can simultaneously offer inspiration and encumbrance.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Nancy Horan has done it again, capturing the entwined lives of Fanny Osbourne and Robert Louis Stevenson so uncannily, it reads like truth.”—**Sarah Blake, author of *The Postmistress***

“Horan has a distinct knack for evoking the rich, complicated lives of long-gone artists and the women who inspired them.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Q&A with Author Nancy Horan



Your New York Times bestselling debut *Loving Frank*—named one of the best books of 2007 by the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*—explored the true story behind Frank Lloyd Wright and his lover, Mamah Borthwick Cheney. What prompted you to turn to the Stevensons next?

Part of it was serendipity. I stumbled upon Robert Louis Stevenson while visiting the Monterey area, where he lived in 1879. Curiosity spurred me on. Why was he there? The more I learned, the more I saw how rich a character he was, how timely his life might be for contemporary readers. But equally engaging was Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, the California woman he fell in love with and pursued. Both Stevenson and Fanny were on their own journeys of discovery when they met. There were plenty of obstacles in their way, but they managed to marry, and their life together after that was marked by adventures and challenges worthy of a Stevenson novel. I felt immediately that they were good company, and I knew from the start they would remain so for the next four or five years—however long it would take to write their story.

At first glance, Robert Louis Stevenson didn't seem to have much in common with Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, an American ten years his senior who left her philandering husband in order to pursue an artist's life in France. Yet he fell passionately in love with her, crossing the Atlantic and the American frontier and risking his life in order to win her hand. Why were they so drawn to each other?

Louis, as he was known by his family and friends, was attracted to Fanny at first by her appearance. He spied her through the window of a French inn where she was dining with some of his artist friends, who had arrived before he did. He was smitten by her earthy good looks, her olive skin, her lack of stiffness. She was entirely unlike the young women his parents had in mind for him, and that was part of her attraction. She rolled her own cigarettes and carried a pistol. Since he was a boy, Louis had fantasized about a life of travel.

As he grew to know Fanny, he discovered a fellow free spirit who'd had her own high adventures already. She had lived in Nevada mining camps, and in other ways exhibited the grit associated with pioneer women. Yet she was a lover of books and art who had artistic ambitions of her own.

Fanny was not immediately drawn to Louis. She thought he was charming and entertaining, but immature, eccentric, and a bit melodramatic. As she came to know him, though, she discovered his great talent as a writer, as well as his genuine decency. Stevenson was much loved for his kindness and generosity.

How did Fanny and Louis shape each others' artistic lives and accomplishments? Has researching and writing *Under the Wide and Starry Sky* changed your view of such classics as *Treasure Island* or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*?

Fanny married Louis when he was a relatively unknown travel writer and essayist who was not yet able to support himself with his writing. He began writing novels after he was married to her. He trusted her critical opinions of his work, calling her his "critic on the hearth." Some biographers believe she meddled too much in his work, yet Stevenson continued the practice of seeking his wife's opinion for many years. Robert Louis Stevenson was a towering literary figure in the 19th century. Possibly Fanny's greatest contribution to his achievements (aside from providing a living, breathing example of a complicated woman for his female characterizations) is the fact that her devoted attentions kept him alive despite his terrible ill health.

Simply rereading *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* has made me appreciate him much more. The two books are very different. *Treasure Island*, which was serialized in *Young Folks* magazine when it first appeared, was viewed as a boy's adventure story, and Stevenson got the reputation of being a children's author after it was published. I think that reputation fell away with *Jekyll and Hyde*, which is dark, dark, dark. It is an allegory that strikes a chilling chord in most readers. Interestingly enough, most people today haven't read it. Yet during the writing of my book, I was struck by how often the names Jekyll and Hyde appear in print, or are spoken in conversation. Even if the story is not read much today, people understand the theme of it quite well: that in most of us, a duality exists. We contain within ourselves the potential for both good and evil.

Did Stevenson shape Fanny's literary accomplishments? In some ways, yes. She had written magazine pieces before meeting him, though she'd only published one before their marriage. Later, she wrote several short stories that made it into print. Publication of her stories may have occurred because of Stevenson's influence with editors. Fanny and Louis collaborated on one collection of linked stories, entitled *The Dynamiter*, and a play called *The Hanging Judge*. Nevertheless, I believe Fanny felt frustrated living in the shadow of so popular a figure as her husband. She longed to be appreciated for something more than her value as his helpmeet.

What were some of the obstacles the Stevensons faced, and how did Fanny and Louis help each other navigate them? What made their relationship endure?

The greatest obstacle was Louis's ill health. He suffered from a serious lung ailment that was thought to be tuberculosis, though some contemporary writers question that diagnosis and suggest that it may have been bronchiectasis. Treatment options for serious lung conditions were limited in the 19th century, and usually involved a change of climate. The Stevensons' life together became a quest to find a climate that would allow Louis to get out of bed and regain strength and mobility. They lived in the Swiss Alps, the south of France, and Saranac, New York at the urging of Louis's various doctors. Fanny performed any number of heroic feats to keep him alive, and to get him to safe places where he stood a chance of living longer.

For his part, Louis provided the emotional support Fanny needed to get through a difficult divorce; he also provided the artistic lifestyle she craved, reliability, and through his prolific writing, the financial security

she would need if he died. The promise of security was not evident when she married him, though. He was near penniless at the beginning. What he offered her at that time was his gentle, hilarious, brilliant, devoted self. Why did their relationship endure? Certainly it was complicated and often thorny; different individuals might not have stayed the challenging course they faced. But for all their flaws and eccentricities, they loved each other and derived great pleasure from the other's company. Stevenson was able to say, well along in his relationship with her, that marrying Fanny was the smartest thing he ever did.

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Horan's spectacular second novel (following book-club favorite *Loving Frank*, 2007) has been worth the wait. Brimming with the same artistic verve that drives her complicated protagonists, it follows the loving, tumultuous partnership of Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson and his Indiana-born wife, Fanny Osbourne. Fanny, an aspiring artist still tied to her unfaithful first husband when they meet in 1875, is fiery, courageous, and the mother of two living children. Louis, a younger man whose frailty belies a joyous, energetic spirit, dreams of writing full-time. While he perfects his craft, she becomes his protector and editor-collaborator, accompanying him across Europe and America and finally to Samoa in hopes of healing his weak lungs. This is more than just another novel designed to honor the unsung accomplishments of a famous man's spouse, though. Equally adventurous and colorful, Louis and Fanny could each command the story singlehandedly. Together, they are riveting and insightfully envisioned, including through moving depiction of how their relationship transforms over time. Horan also explores relevant social concerns, such as cultural imperialism and xenophobia, and how Stevenson's life influenced his literary themes. An exhilarating epic about a free-spirited couple who traveled the world yet found home only in one another. -- Sarah Johnson

Review

"Fascinating . . . a novel that shows how love and marriage can simultaneously offer inspiration and encumbrance."—*The New York Times Book Review*

"A lot of fun . . . Horan drapes this skeleton of facts with a richly imagined musculature of love, laughter, pain and sacrifice. Unlike *Loving Frank*, which focused on Mamah Cheney, *Under the Wide and Starry Sky* is a dual portrait, with Louis and Fanny sharing the limelight in the best spirit of teamwork—a romantic partnership."—*USA Today*

"Horan's depiction of their life together is flawless. We are right there with the couple as they transform over the years."—*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

"Horan's prose is gorgeous. . . . Few writers are as masterful as she is at blending carefully researched history with the novelist's art."—*The Dallas Morning News*

"A delight from start to finish . . . as stirring as any of R. L. Stevenson's famous tales."—*Hudson Valley News*

"A dazzling love story that unspools across years and continents. Horan deftly brings to life a woman shamefully overlooked by history, and celebrates her contributions to the man whom history remembered."—*BookPage*

"Fanny and Louis are wild-hearted seekers, and Nancy Horan traces their incredible journey fearlessly, plunging us through decades, far-flung continents, and chilling brushes with death. Ambitious and often breathtaking, this sweeping story spills over with spirited, uncompromising life."—**Paula McLain, author of *The Paris Wife***

“It’s one thing to bring the past to life. It’s quite another to bring it back rich in all its glorious complications. Nancy Horan has done it again, capturing the entwined lives of Fanny Osbourne and Robert Louis Stevenson so uncannily, it reads like truth—and better. I loved every minute I had it in my hands.”—**Sarah Blake, author of *The Postmistress***

“Maybe it goes without saying that it’s a hard thing to chase a book as successful as *Loving Frank* with a second novel. For one thing, you worry it was an accident the first time around. The good news is that it wasn’t (an accident), and Nancy Horan is back with another beautifully crafted story, and no signs of a sophomore slump.”—**Pete Dexter, author of *Paris Trout*, winner of the National Book Award**

“What an extraordinary story! Throughout the novel, I felt I was right there with Fanny and Louis, sharing their hopes and hardships as they traveled the world. The portrayal of their lives on Samoa was especially gripping. Nancy Horan has transformed everything I thought I knew about Robert Louis Stevenson, and in Fanny—his passionate, independent American wife—she has created a woman whose struggles continue to haunt me.”—**Lauren Belfer, author of *A Fierce Radiance* and *City of Light***

“As she did so magically in *Loving Frank*, Nancy Horan brings to life a distant time and faraway places populated by characters at once familiar and delightfully new. By widening her lens to shine a light on the lives of those whom history usually ignores—the wives of famous men—Horan gives us a marvelous gift: an entirely new appreciation of Robert Louis Stevenson and Fanny Osbourne.”—**Ayelet Waldman, author of *Red Hook Road***

“Fans of *Loving Frank* will adore this authentic, richly detailed, and utterly captivating new novel from Nancy Horan. *Under the Wide and Starry Sky* is a globe-spanning literary wonder—the perfect book for those who read fiction in search of the truth.”—**Jamie Ford, author of *Songs of Willow Frost***

“Horan’s spectacular second novel has been worth the wait. Brimming with the same artistic verve that drives her complicated protagonists, it follows the loving, tumultuous partnership of Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson and his Indiana-born wife, Fanny Osbourne. . . . Equally adventurous and colorful, Louis and Fanny could each command the story singlehandedly. Together, they are riveting and insightfully envisioned, including through moving depiction of how their relationship transforms over time. . . . An exhilarating epic about a free-spirited couple who traveled the world yet found home only in one another.”—**Booklist (starred review)**

“This beautifully written novel, neatly balanced between its two protagonists, makes them come alive with grace, humor, and understanding. Horan’s empathy for both Louis and Fanny allows her to capture their life together with all the complexity and nuance of a real-life relationship.”—**Publishers Weekly**

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mark Thomas:

Reading a guide tends to be new life style on this era globalization. With reading you can get a lot of information that will give you benefit in your life. With book everyone in this world can share their idea. Ebooks can also inspire a lot of people. A great deal of author can inspire their reader with their story as well as their experience. Not only the storyline that share in the ebooks. But also they write about the information about something that you need example. How to get the good score toefl, or how to teach your children,

there are many kinds of book that exist now. The authors these days always try to improve their talent in writing, they also doing some exploration before they write to their book. One of them is this Under the Wide and Starry Sky: A Novel.

Kenneth Poor:

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