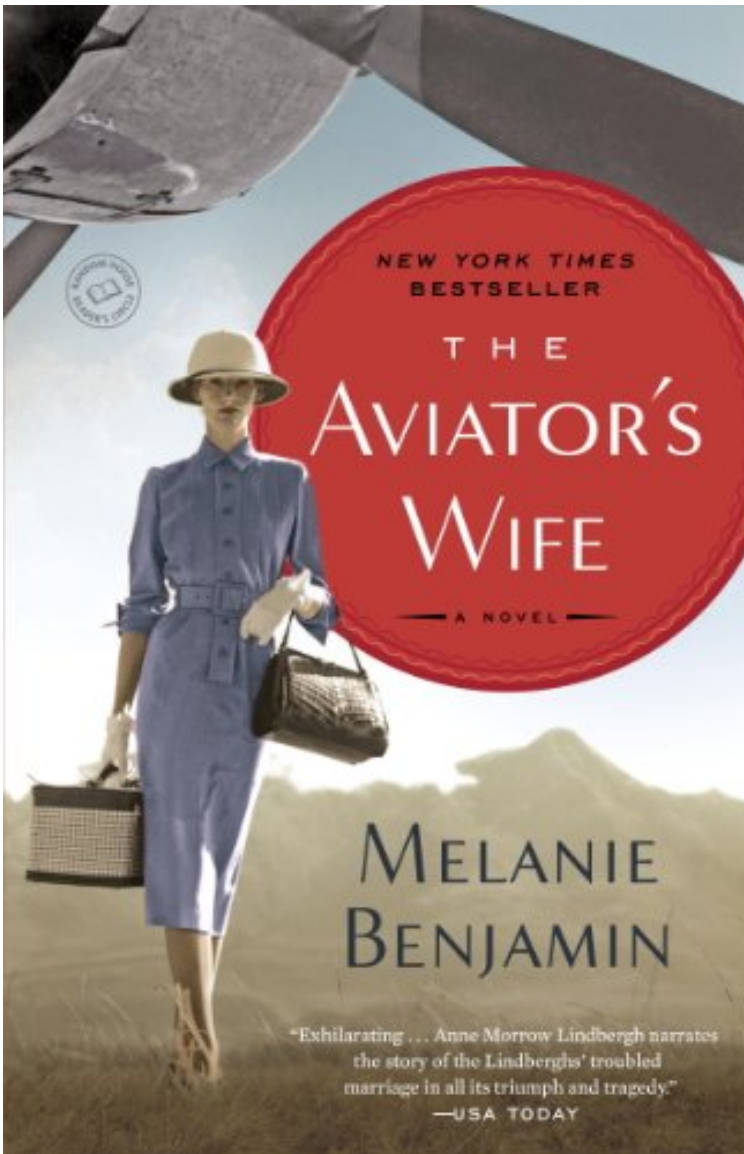


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The Aviator's Wife: A Novel



*Par Melanie Benjamin
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn the spirit of Loving Frank and The Paris Wife, acclaimed novelist Melanie Benjamin pulls back the curtain on the marriage of one of Americas most extraordinary couples: Charles Lindbergh and Anne Morrow Lindbergh.The history [is] exhilarating. . . .The Aviators Wife soars.USA Today NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLERWhen 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 Charless 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 aviators 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, lifes infinite possibilities for change and happiness. Look for special features inside. Join the Random House Readers Circle for author chats and more. Praise for *The Aviators Wife* Remarkable . . . *The Aviators Wife* succeeds [in] putting the reader inside Anne Lindberghs life with her famous husband. *The Denver Post* Anne Morrow Lindbergh narrates the story of the Lindberghs troubled marriage in all its triumph and tragedy. *USA Today* [This novel] will fascinate history buffs and surprise those who know of her only as the aviators wife. People Its hard to quit reading this intimate historical fiction. *The Dallas Morning News* Fictional biography at its finest. Booklist (starred review) Utterly unforgettable. *Publishers Weekly* (starred review) An intimate examination of the life and emotional mettle of Anne Morrow. *The Washington Post* A story of both triumph and pain that will take your breath away. Kate Alcott, author of *The Dressmaker* Extrait Benjamin / *THE AVIATOR'S WIFE* chapter 1 December 1927 Down to earth. I repeated the phrase to myself, whispering it in wonder. Down to earth. What a plodding expression, really, when you considered it! I couldnt help but think of muddy fields and wheel ruts and worms yet people always meant it as a compliment. Down to earth did you hear that, Elisabeth? Can you believe Daddy would say that about an aviator, of all people? I doubt he even realized what he was saying, my sister murmured as she scribbled furiously on her lap desk, despite the rocking motion of the train. Now, Anne, dear, if youd just let me finish this letter . . . Of course he didnt, I persisted, refusing to be ignored. This was the third letter shed written today! Daddy never does know what hes saying, which is why I love him. But honestly, thats what his letter said I do hope you can meet Colonel Lindbergh. Hes so down to earth! Well, Daddy is quite taken with the colonel. . . Oh, I know and I didnt mean to criticize him! I was just thinking out loud. I wouldnt say anything like that in person. Suddenly my mood shifted, as it always seemed to do whenever I was with my family. Away from them, I could be confident, almost careless, with my words and ideas. Once, someone even called me vivacious (although to be honest, he was a college freshman intoxicated by bathtub gin and his first whiff of expensive perfume). Whenever my immediate family gathered, however, it took me a while to relax, to reacquaint myself with the rhythm of speech and good-natured joshing that they seemed to fall into so readily. I imagined that they carried it with them, even when we were all scattered; I fancied each one of them humming the tune of this family symphony in their heads as they went about their busy lives. Like so many other family traits the famous Morrow sense of humor, for instance the musical gene appeared to have skipped me. So it always took me longer to remember my part in this domestic song and dance. Id been traveling with my sister and brother on this Mexican-bound train for a week, and still I felt tongue-tied and shy. Particularly around Dwight, now a senior at Groton; my brother had grown paler, prone to strange laughing fits, almost reverting to childhood at times, even as physically he was fast maturing into a carbon copy of our father. Elisabeth was the same as ever, and I was the same as ever around her; no longer a confident college senior, I was diminished in her golden presence. In the stale air of the train car, I felt as limp and wrinkled as the sad linen dress I was wearing. While she looked as pressed and poised as a mannequin, not a wrinkle or smudge on her smart silk suit, despite the red dust blowing in through the inadequate windows. Now, dont go brooding already, Anne, for heavens sake! Of course you wouldnt criticize Daddy to his face you, of all people! There! Elisabeth signed her letter with a flourish, folded it carefully, and tucked it in her pocket. Ill wait until later before I address it. Just think how grand it will look on the embassy stationery! Who are you writing this time? Connie? Elisabeth nodded brusquely; she wrote to Connie Chilton, her former roommate from Smith, so frequently the question hardly seemed worth acknowledging. Then I almost asked if she needed a stamp, before I remembered. We were dignitaries now. Daddy was ambassador to Mexico. We Morrows had no need for such common objects as stamps. All our letters would go in the special government mail pouch, along with Daddys memos and reports. It was rumored that Colonel Lindbergh himself would be taking a mail pouch back to Washington with him, when he flew away. At least, thats what Daddy had insinuated in his last letter, the one I had received just before boarding the train in New York with Elisabeth and Dwight. We were in Mexico now; wed crossed the border during the night. I couldnt stop marveling at the strange landscape as wed chugged our way south; the flat, strangely light-filled plains of the Midwest; the dreary desert in Texas, the lonely adobe houses or the occasional tin-roofed shack underneath a bleached-out, endless sky. Mexico, by contrast, was greener than I had imagined, especially as we climbed toward Mexico City. Did you tell Connie that we saw Gloria Swanson with Mr. Kennedy? Wed caught a glimpse of the two, the movie star and the

banker (whom we knew socially), when they boarded the train in Texas. Both of them had their heads down and coat collars turned up. Joseph Kennedy was married, with a brood of Catholic children and a lovely wife named Rose. Miss Swanson was married to a French marquis, according to the Photoplay I sometimes borrowed from my roommate. I didn't. Daddy wouldn't approve. We do have to be more careful now that he's ambassador. That's true. But didn't she look so tiny in person! Much smaller than in the movies. Hardly taller than me! I've heard that about movie stars. Elisabeth nodded thoughtfully. They say Douglas Fairbanks isn't much taller than Mary Pickford. A colored porter knocked on the door to our compartment; he stuck his head inside. We'll be at the station momentarily, miss, he said to Elisabeth, who smiled graciously and nodded, her blond curls tickling her forehead. Then he retreated. I can't wait to see Con, I said, my stomach dancing in anticipation. And Mother, of course. But mainly Con! I missed my little sister; missed and envied her, both. At fourteen, she was able to make the move to Mexico City with our parents and live the gay diplomatic life that I could glimpse only on holidays like this; my first since Daddy had been appointed. I picked up my travel case and followed Elisabeth out of our private car and into the aisle, where we were joined by Dwight, who was tugging at his tie. Is this tied right, Anne? He frowned, looking so like Daddy that I almost laughed; Daddy never could master the art of tying a necktie, either. Daddy couldn't master the art of wearing clothes, period. His pants were always too long and wrinkled, like elephants' knees. Yes, of course. But I gave it a good tug anyway. Then suddenly the train had stopped; we were on a platform swirling with excited passengers greeting their loved ones, in a soft, blanketing warmth that gently thawed my bones, still chilled from the Northampton winter I carried with me, literally, on my arm. I'd forgotten to pack my winter coat in my trunk. Anne! Elisabeth! Dwight! A chirping, a laugh, and then Con was there, her round little face brown from sun, her dark hair pulled back from her face with a gay red ribbon. She was wearing a Mexican dress, all bright embroidery and full skirt; she even had huaraches on her tiny feet. Oh, look at you! I hugged her, laughing. What a picture! A true seorita! Darlings! Turning blindly, I found myself in my mother's embrace, and then too quickly released as she moved on to Elisabeth. Mother looked as ever, a sensible New England clubwoman plunked down in the middle of the tropics. Daddy, his pants swimming as usual, his tie askew, was shaking Dwight's hand and kissing Elisabeth on the cheek at the same time. Finally he turned to me; rocking back on his heels, he looked me up and down and then nodded solemnly, although his eyes twinkled. And there's Anne. Reliable Anne. You never change, my daughter. I blushed, not sure if this was a compliment, choosing to think it might be. Then I ran to his open arms, and kissed his stubbly cheek. Merry Christmas, Mr. Ambassador! Yes, yes a merry Christmas it will be! Now, hurry up, hurry up, and you may be able to catch Colonel Lindbergh before he goes out. He's still here? I asked, as Mother marshaled us expertly into two waiting cars, both black and gleaming, ostentatiously so. I was acutely aware of our luggage piling up on the platform, matching and initialed and gleaming with comfortable wealth. I couldn't help but notice how many people were lugging straw cases as they piled into donkey carts. Yes, Colonel Lindbergh is still hereoh, my dear, you should have seen the crowds at the airfield when he arrived! Two hours late, but nobody minded a bit. That plane, what's it called, the Ghost of St. Louis, isn't it? Con began to giggle helplessly, and I suppressed a smile. It's the Spirit of St. Louis, I corrected her, and my mother met my gaze with a bemused expression in her downward-slanted eyes. I felt myself blush, knowing what she was thinking. Anne? Swooning for the dashing young hero, just like all the other girls? Who could have imagined? Yes, of course, the Spirit of St. Louis. And the colonel has agreed to spend the holidays with us in the embassy. Your father is beside himself. Mr. Henry Ford has even sent a plane to fetch the colonel's mother, and she'll be here, as well. At dinner, Elisabeth will take special care of himoh, and you, too, dear, you must help. To tell the truth, I find the colonel to be rather shy. He's ridiculously shy, Con agreed, with another giggle. I don't think he's ever really talked to girls before! Con, now, please. The colonel's our guest. We must make him feel at home, Mother admonished. I listened in dismay as I followed her into the second car; Daddy, Dwight, and Elisabeth roared off in the first. The colonel a total stranger would be part of our family Christmas? I certainly hadn't bargained on that, and couldn't help but feel that it was rude of a stranger to insinuate himself in this way. Yet at the mere mention of his name my heart began to beat faster, my mind began to race with the implications of this unexpected stroke of what the rest of the world would call enormous good luck. Oh, how the girls back at Smith would scream once they found out! How envious they all would be! Before I could sort out my tangled thoughts, we were being whisked away to the embassy at such a clip I didn't have time to take in the strange, exotic landscape of Mexico City. My only impression was a blur of multicolored lights in the gathering shadows of late afternoon, and bleached-out buildings punctuated by violent shocks of color. So delightful to think that there were wildflowers blooming in

December! Is the colonel really as shy as all that? It seemed impossible, that this extraordinary young man would suffer from such an ordinary affliction, just like me. Oh, yes. Talk to him about aviation that's really the only way you can get him to say more than yes, no, and pass the salt, Mother said. Then she patted me on my knee. Now, how was your last term? Aren't you glad you listened to reason after all, when you thought you wanted to go to Vassar? Now you're almost through, almost a Smith graduate, just like Elisabeth and me! I smiled, looked at my shoes caked with the dust of travel and nodded, although my mouth was set in a particular prickly way, my only outward sign of rebellion. After almost four years, I still wished I'd been allowed to go to Vassar, as I'd so desperately wanted. But I swallowed my annoyance and dutifully recited grades and small academic triumphs, even as my mind raced ahead of the two sleek embassy cars. Colonel

Lindbergh. I hadn't counted on meeting him so soon or at all, really. I'd thought his visit was merely an official stop on some grand tour of Latin America and that he'd be gone long before my vacation started. My palms grew clammy, and I wished I'd changed into a nicer frock on the train. I'd never met a hero before. I worried that one of us would be disappointed. I can't wait for the colonel to meet Elisabeth, Mother said, as if she could read my thoughts. Oh, and you, too, dear. I nodded. But I knew what she meant. My older sister was a beauty—the beauty, in the parlance of the Morrow family, as if there could be room for only one. She had a porcelain complexion, blond curls, round blue eyes with thick black eyelashes, and a darling of a nose, the master brushstroke that finished off her portrait of a face. Whereas I was all nose, with slanty eyes like Mother's, and dark hair; while I was shorter than Elisabeth, my figure was rounder. Too round, too busty and curvy, for the streamlined flapper fashions that were still all the rage this December of 1927. I'm sure I won't be able to think of a thing to say to him. I'm sure I won't be able to think of a thing to say to anyone. Oh, what a lot of bother this all is! Gesturing at the plush red upholstery, the liveried driver, the twin flags—one of the United States, the other of Mexico—planted on the hood of the car, I allowed myself a rare outburst, meeting Mother's disapproving frown without blinking. Christmas was special. The rest of the year we might all be flung about, like a game of Puss-in-the-Corner. But Christmas was home, was safe, was the idea of family that I carried around with me the rest of the year, even as I recognized it didn't quite match up with reality.

Already I missed my cozy room back home in Englewood, with my writing desk, my snug twin bed covered by the white chenille bedspread my grandmother had made as a bride, bookshelves full of childhood favorites—Anne of Green Gables, the Just So Stories, Kim. Stubbornly, I told myself that I would never get used to Daddy's new life as a diplomat, his ability to attract dashing young aviators notwithstanding. I much preferred him as a staid banker. Anne, please. Don't let your father hear you say this. He's very fond of the young man, and wants to help him with all his new responsibilities. I gather Colonel Lindbergh doesn't have much of a family, only his mother. It's our duty to welcome him into our little family circle. I nodded, instantly vanquished; unable to explain to her how I felt. I never was able to explain anything to my mother.

Elisabeth she understood; Dwight she entrusted to my father. Con was young and bubbly and simply a delight. I was Anne. The shy one, the strange one. Only in letters did my mother and I have anything close to true communion. In person, we didn't know what to do with each other. And duty I understood all too well. If a history of our family was to be written, it could be summed up with that one word. Duty. Duty to others less fortunate, less happy, less educated; less. Although most of the time I thought there really couldn't be anyone in this world less than me. Now, don't worry yourself so, Anne, Mother continued, almost sympathetically; at least she patted my arm. The colonel is a mere mortal, despite what your father and all the newspapers say. A handsome mere mortal, Con said with a dreamy sigh, and I couldn't help but laugh.

When had my little sister started thinking of men as handsome? But at her age, I had started to dream of heroes, I recalled. Sometimes, I still did. The cars slowed and turned into a gated drive; we stopped in front of an enormous, showy palace—the embassy. Our embassy, I realized, and had to stifle an urge to giggle. I followed Mother and Con out of the car and hung back as Daddy marched up a grand stone staircase covered in a red carpet. A line of uniformed officers stood on both sides of the staircase, heralding our arrival. Can you believe it? I whispered to Elisabeth, clinging to her hand for comfort. She shook her head, her eyes snapping with amusement even as her face paled. The flight of steps seemed endless, and Elisabeth was not strong, physically. But she took a deep breath and began to climb them, so I had no choice but to follow. I couldn't look at the uniformed men; I couldn't look at the landing, where he was waiting. So I looked at the carpet instead, and hoped that I would never run out of it. Of course, I did; we were done climbing, finding ourselves on a shaded landing, and Mother was pushing Elisabeth forward, exclaiming, Colonel Lindbergh,

I'm so glad for you to meet my eldest daughter, Elisabeth! Elisabeth smiled and held out her hand, so naturally. As if she was meeting just another college boy, and not the hero of our time. I'm happy to meet you,

Colonel, she said coolly. Then she glided past, following Daddy into the embassy. Oh, and of course, this is Anne, Mother said after a moment, pushing me forward as well. I looked up and up. And up. Into a face instantly familiar and yet so unexpected I almost gasped; piercing eyes, high forehead, cleft chin, just like in the newsreels; a face made for statues and history books, I couldn't help but think. And here he was suddenly right in front of me, amid my family in this unexpected, almost cartoonish, opulence. My head swam, and I wished I had never left my dormitory room. He shook my hand without a smile, for a smile would be too ordinary for him. Then he dropped it quickly, as if it stung. He took a step back and bumped into a stone pillar. His expression never changed, although I thought I detected a faint blush. Then he turned to follow Elisabeth and Daddy into the embassy. Mother bustled after them. I stood where I was for a long moment, wondering why my hand still tingled where he had held it. *Revue de presse* The history is exhilarating. . .

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