

Reading Guide for *Lost Son* by M. Allen Cunningham

About the Book

Lost Son is both an imaginative rendition of the life and times of the great German lyrical poet, Rainer Maria Rilke and “a dark fantasia on his art” (author’s words). It is grounded in years of meticulous research and reading, including the author’s self described Rilke pilgrimage in 2001. He and his wife traced the poet’s life path, from Prague to Munich to Paris, to the Rhone Valley of Switzerland, where Rilke spent his final years after having been drafted into the Austrian army at the age of 40 for the duration of World War I. Later, he returned to Paris for eight weeks to immerse himself in Rilke’s papers, living in a garret apartment much like one of Rilke’s.

Lost Son is organized around Rilke’s key relationships with his parents, his sculptress wife Clara Westhoff, the sculptor Auguste Rodin, the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker and – most of all – his epic love affair and life long friendship with the woman who became his muse: the author and intellectual Lou Andreas-Salome. Through Mark Cunningham’s inspired and beautiful hand, the complex portrait that emerges of the poet as child, son, misfit military cadet and soldier, student, lover, protégé, mentor, husband, father and friend reveals a deeply flawed personality who achieves professional and artistic reknown – Rilke is arguably the most influential poet of the 20th century -- at great personal and moral cost.

With vividly realized characters and historical sweep, *Lost Son* also brings to life the intellectual and cultural milieu of turn-of-the-20th century Europe, along with the physical landscape, especially and including the city of Paris, where the novel opens with Rilke’s arrival there in 1902 at the age of 27. Rilke’s Paris is the Paris of the poor -- squalid, pestilent, putrescent, and reeking. For one who was born, so to speak, with no skin, without the ability that most of us have to distance ourselves from some things for the sake of our own well-being, the Rilke of *Lost Son* was plunged back into the traumas of his childhood and his break up with Lou from the sensory shocks of Paris and its denizens. Cunningham uses this circumstance as his jumping off place for exploring the landscape of Rilke’s psyche and development as a poet. His inspiration for this approach to Rilke’s life and times was two-fold: *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke’s own autobiographical novel of a tormented poet in Paris, the Prodigal Son, “a man who didn’t want to be loved”; and the gritty photographs of Eugene Atget, who was documenting the same Paris as Rilke at exactly the same time. [see the author’s website, www.mallencunningham.com for some of these stunning images]

The narrator of *Lost Son* is a haunted young poet of the present who is on a quest to re-imagine the historical Rilke, to possess and understand his “impressions, fears, ambitions, failures, friendships, and triumphs.” Late in the novel he explains to Rilke, “Maybe I am sailing into the past, your past, and maybe this journey will endow me with new depths of feeling.”

About the Author

At the age of 29, Mark Cunningham has now published two remarkably mature novels of great depth and beauty -- *The Green Age of Asher Witherow*, chosen as a #1 Book Sense Pick -- and *Lost Son*. He grew up in the Diablo Valley north of San Francisco, the setting for his first novel, and presently lives with his wife in Portland, Oregon.

When asked about when he first had a sense of writing as a vocation, he claims a “landmark moment” about being on the tube in London with the woman who is now his wife, during their semester abroad in college. They had just come out of a literature class and were talking about the life and work of John Keats, when he turned to her and announced that he was going to become a writer, and with a chuckle, adds “and pursue it wholeheartedly and with total disregard for reality.”

Interview with the Author

You've put out quite an impressive a body of work for your age, young man! Two large novels -- *The Green Age of Asher Witherow* and now *Lost Son*.

Thanks (chuckles).

Both of your novels have been written from history. Is that coincidence?

You know, that's kind of funny. I guess it is coincidence but I find myself drawn back to that same kind of thing in starting my 3rd novel now, a historical setting, late 19th century. This time it's my family's history, but it's the same experience of sifting through this material and finding the story in it, finding the narrative arc. And I don't know why I am so drawn to the 19th century. It might be partly that my reading life began with the great 19th century writers, American writers, Emerson and Thoreau. They were my first literary Gods.

When you were 14, your mother gave you a copy of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, and that started you on a path to becoming a great fan of his work. But what brought you to write a novel about Rilke?

That was a driving question through the course of writing *Lost Son*, which was why am I not writing a biography, and writing a novel instead. One answer to that is just that I'm not an academic. But the more compelling answer to me, as a fiction writer, was that this life story seemed so rich with dramas and tensions and conflicts and relationships and these really incredibly inspiring moments that it was just ready made for a dramatic, complex narrative. Fiction can be so special and so moving, with the absolute immediacy and absolute intimacy that it creates, so the novel seemed a very suitable way to approach a life that was as special and complex and deeply human as Rilke's life is.

For instance, one of the first images that came to me was the young Rilke in the outfit of a girl. Something about that really haunted me, and I thought that would be a powerful image to put early in the novel. That aspect of his childhood truly fascinates me -- how it contributed to forming his sensibility; his extreme sensitivity, his lack of any protection in the world, and his total vulnerability to everything around him.

Rilke's father always blamed Rilke's mother for everything that went wrong with him, and yet Rilke seemed very devoted to her, as a little boy. When did his attitude change, and why?

I think the turning point came when Rilke was about ten years old. He was sent away to military academy and really left to his own devices among a whole host of boys all two years older, rough and tumble military family kids. Prior to that, Rilke had been raised as a girl, and his mother had inculcated this whole practice of responding to her in a very feminine, very obsequious way. It's true that in Europe at the time Rilke was being raised it was a pretty common practice for little sons to be raised as little daughters in terms of dress and fashion and even behavior, playing with dolls and what not. But in the context of his family, it was taken to a greater extreme, I think. Biographers speculate that the motivation for that was that Rilke's mother had lost a baby daughter a year before she gave birth to him and so she was seeking to fill some void.

Tell us about Lou Andreas Salome.

Rilke's relationship with Lou is really a major chord in this book and its an astonishing story. The year they met, 1897, she was a famous writer in Europe. She had written a biography of

Nietzsche with whom she had had something of a romantic liaison that ended badly – for Nietzsche. Essentially she refused his advances, and the speculation was that his madness was partly a result of that. So she was this lady of letters, an accomplished writer, and already known to be the woman who had broken Nietzsche's heart. Later on, she befriended Freud and became one of his first protégés.

The dynamic between Lou and Rilke and then the way their relationship transpired from 1897 basically to Rilke's death 30 years later starts with a tumultuous affair, during which she became to Rilke a surrogate mother, a sister, a spouse, and a muse, all at once. Then at a certain point she had to cut the cord, and -- as she saw it, for his own well being -- send him off on his own. He was sent reeling from that for a long time, and *Lost Son* really does seek to capture the enduring love that he felt for Lou, the sense that she was the unattainable romance of his life.

What is your take on her in terms of her relationship with Rilke? Do you see a certain amount of seduction/alienation behavior in it?

Oh! That's interesting!. It was to some degree, I think. But things were complicated. She was 14 years older than he when they first had the affair; and she was married and he was essentially an obscure poor nobody, at 21 just trying to fulfill this sense of his destiny as a poet.

It depends on the reader, I guess, but you can read this novel and you can infer that.

Oh sure! Yes! And I like that aspect! I want the book to remain an open question in many regards; for readers to inhabit these relationships and come away thinking about them in various ways. But I've been very cautious not to come to a judgment like that, because, in the process of creating this novel, it seemed to me that an explicit sort of perspective like that might diminish the complexity of all the human conflicts that are happening in these relationships.

Now what do you make of Lou's condemnation of him to his wife, Clara? Lou visits Clara in 1907, long after their affair, and denounces Rilke as "an apostate father and husband," who anybody in their right mind would send the police after.

Right. That's a very odd moment in the Rilke-Lou relationship, because they hadn't been lovers for seven years but they'd been maintaining an avid and really personal correspondence for about a four year period, one of great sympathy and understanding and mutual respect. You wonder how deep her bond was and how much love she harbored for Rilke. And how that influenced this seemingly random attack, in 1907. Did it come from some old wound in her in never being able to fulfill what could possibly have been a great relationship? Because Lou and Rilke were in many ways destined to be together. In any case, she seems to have had some kind of epiphany or come to some place of feeling that she was entitled to judge Rilke, after finally meeting Clara without Rilke's being there, which I think was a real shock to Lou in some ways. They could relate to each other as the two women who were really the magnetic poles of Rilke's existence. He gravitated between Lou and Clara, Lou being the unattainable lover muse and Clara the wife, fellow worker, and fellow artist.

Who he has abandoned.

Right, Lou does make that charge. But I think it's interesting how Clara responds at that moment. The relationship between Clara and Rilke so fascinates me because she always deeply respected Rilke's need for solitude even while sometimes urging him for greater intimacy. Their letters on the subject of their lives together when they're talking about how they'll manage to live together, or if they'll manage to live together, are full of this mutual understanding that's very moving. And after Lou made these accusations in 1907, and Clara was the one who came back and communicated all these charges to him, she says she couldn't defend him, but she communicated the news in a way that was very tender. It was almost as if she didn't know what

to make of it. She presented it to him as if to say “I didn’t know what to tell Lou. I was surprised by this. What do you have to say?”

Do you have a sense from reading all the correspondence between Rilke and Clara as to whether or not this really was a mutual decision to live separately, so as to pursue their respective careers?

Well I know that she deeply respected his wishes, and that’s clear in her letters. There’s a real sense of understanding between them in the correspondence. But at the same time it is interesting to look closely at her letters, particularly early on in their relationship during the time shortly after Worpspede [an artist’s colony of sorts where they met and married], when their correspondence first took off. You get a sense that she is still defining herself as an artist, and she latches onto and responds to Rilke’s ability to articulate his own artistic needs and requirements. And that answers a need in her to define those things for herself. So I think her sensibility of what it meant to be an artist and the importance of solitude and the importance of constant work was nurtured within the context of her developing relationship with Rilke.

The other intensely close and influential relationship on Rilke was with the sculptor, Auguste Rodin, and he too threw him out!

Right. Rilke first met Rodin in 1902. He had come to Paris to write a monograph about the sculptor’s work, and Rodin became something of an idol for Rilke in his manner of working steadily and with this immense and powerful discipline that Rilke had not yet been able to attain in his own work. He quickly saw Rodin’s example as the means to which he could one day rise to artistic greatness. So Rodin became a much admired figure in Rilke’s life and very important to his personal development as a poet.

And then just turned on him. Which he had a habit of doing, apparently. How did Rilke react?

His immediate response was to write a letter to Rodin the very following day. The essence was that I know you have done this because you have to protect yourself and protect your art. I will take that as an example; and the strength that you have shown in your own discipline and in your own self awareness as an artist is something I will seek to emulate. It was really a remarkable response and a very humble response.

Was that really the way Rilke felt, do you think?

It’s really hard to know, and that’s why he’s an amazing figure for a novel. He is so wholly and entirely a poet that there’s no other way to know him except through the things he created, and a major part of his body of work was his correspondence. He wrote more than 10,000 letters and he’s creating himself as a poet in his letters, just as he is in his work. Beyond that, I think mostly he just felt disowned because he had just lost his own father, and Rodin was like a 2nd father. So he must have thought, “Oh my God, I’m a lost son *again*.” [after losing Lou]. His life was just a series of events that orphaned him again and again and again. It’s just amazing. And it began early on. First he was a girl. Then he was a military cadet, then he was a business school cadet, and then he was a law student. Then he was a husband, then he was a father, then he was a secretary [to Rodin] and then he became again a soldier [Rilke was drafted into the Austrian army at the age of 40, for the duration of World War I].

And in there he also became a lover to his soul mate, Lou, with whom he felt like he had found “Home,” only to be sent away. Another very important relationship in the novel is with Paula Modersohn-Becker, the painter. Did you bring that forward for the purpose of the novel, or was that friendship indeed as precious and important to him and to Clara as it seems in the novel?

Yes, it was just as important and precious as in the book. Rilke and Clara were friends with Paula from their time in Worpspede around 1900, and Clara and Paula had been friends prior to that.

Later on in Paris in 1906 when Paula was there working, Rilke was deeply touched by her circumstances, how she had essentially left her husband against his wishes because she had this passionate belief that she had a destiny as a painter. Early on, Rilke and Paula didn't see eye to eye on the way he wanted to live, his need to be separate from his wife and daughter. But later on, after several years of marriage, she came to understand it and came to a place in her art, too, where she felt she could identify with that perspective.

Do you think Rilke blamed himself for not being there for her when she decided to go back to her husband?

I think the guilt that he did suffer over that is evident in the Requiem that he wrote for Paula two years later. It is one of his major poems, and it encapsulates all the driving conflicts of his own life – the idea of how strangely separate art and life can seem from one another sometimes, and the tension between this drive for artistic mastery and the resulting tragedy in one's personal life. It's all there in that poem.

Can you tell us how *Lost Son* was inspired, or a response, to Rilke's big novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* ?

Rilke's novel was largely autobiographical and the germinating notion for me in writing *Lost Son* was that he himself recognized all these complex dramas in his own life and novelized them to some degree. So why not just novelize the whole life? And in doing that, somehow pay homage to this amazing novel that he did write. So there are certain elements in *Lost Son* that are inspired directly by scenes that occur in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. These were often scenes that actually occurred in Rilke's life, so I hope there is an interesting interplay between Rilke's created work and the life that produced it, and then this later novel created across this generational divide, based on Rilke's life and what he had created.

When I first read *Lost Son* I will confess that I couldn't imagine how you had so successfully described what the streets of Paris actually looked like and felt like and smelled like to Rilke when he first went there and what a shock to the senses it was to him. And then I learned about the photographer, Eugene Atget. Was finding Atget's photographs of that time in Paris a dramatic discovery for you?

Yes. It really blew my imagination open in terms of how to capture the Paris that Rilke knew. Atget was working at the same exact time in Paris that Rilke was living there and writing his novel, based on his own experiences in Paris. We have a photographic documentation in Atget of what Rilke was documenting in the poetic manner in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. And sometimes you can hold the two bodies of work up next to each other and the parallels are just astounding. What's more, I found out that they were living in the same apartment building in Montparnasse, at exactly the same time!

Do you suppose they knew each other?

I don't know! That's an amazing sort of feast for the imagination. A whole other novel could be written about a speculative friendship between Atget and Rilke. And I've been surprised to learn that they haven't been discussed together much at all, that the connections and parallels between their two bodies of work haven't been studied more closely.

Did the photographs of Eugene Atget help you get to work on writing this novel?

It did, mainly in the structural sense. Prior to discovering these photographs, the book didn't start with Rilke's arrival in Paris, for instance. It took me quite a while to discover that that was the entrée to this book. And that came about through Atget's work. It enabled me to visualize the terrors that Paris caused Rilke, and to evoke how seeing all that squalor around him could send him reeling back into boyhood. And then we could find out about the relationships that had formed him and the unique traumatic experiences that had formed his sensibility as a poet.

Well it gave you a physical presence to work with, a real place.

I think that's a big thing for me as a writer. I'm finding it's really hard for me to work without a strong sense of place. I need a place that's kind of a driving character in the story. It helps me inhabit that world, and hopefully evoke it effectively.

So to do research you did travel for 10 weeks in Europe, and follow Rilke's life path?

I did. That was a ten week pilgrimage in 2001. We went to Prague and we went to Munich where he met Lou and we ended up in the Rhone valley of Switzerland where he lived at the tower of Muzot. We walked around it in the dark. It was a very eerie and vivid experience. Later, I went back to Paris for eight weeks to do more research with the papers and letters.

At the end the novel, the teller of the tale, your persona, walks up to Rilke's apartment in Munich where he spent those years right after World War I, and meets him on the street. Did you actually have a moment like that where you sensed his presence?

I did, actually, and it was a moment very similar to that one that's captured at the end of the book, in Munich, on that very street corner. There's a plaque on the house where he lived. It has his face on it and just a few words to the effect that the poet Rainer Maria Rilke lived here, in 1917. That was the first moment in 2001 in which I arrived at a place where Rilke had lived and spent a lot of time. It was my first experience of that feeling of living in a certain layer of time that somehow overlaps the layers of time that Rilke lived in that same place. It was a really powerful experience for me.

You have said that *Lost Son* was in some ways a letter sent to a ghost. What did you mean by that?

Saying it is a letter sent to a ghost is my way of highlighting the very personal nature of the novel. This is in no way a book that purports to be an authoritative portrait of Rilke. Writing a book about a figure like Rilke can only be a personal process, because someone like him, a poet so much larger than life, who's become a figure of great legend, gets subjected to a force that the generations who try to understand his work exert upon him. He is turned into a spokesman, I guess, for a certain way of life or a certain artistic manner. That in turn creates something of a two camp situation where he's either adored as a saint or he's reviled as a profligate husband and father who failed to live up to his duties. The truth is probably neither of those things. It's always a more deeply human, a much more complex situation than that. So really the only way to approach his story is in a very personal manner.

Can you give your take on the aesthetic that Rilke was studying with Lou and took for himself, the "thing form," the *ding-gedicht*? Is that akin to what his contemporary, the great American poet William Carlos Williams, said: "No ideas but in things?"

Absolutely, and I think there's also a parallel in T. S. Eliot's idea of the objective correlative, of tying, somehow using an object or a thing to express the secrets of our own inner selves, all of our unfathomable conflicted feelings and emotions. Somehow when you focus your artistic attention on a "thing" and seek to create it as wholly as possible through some artistic discipline, in Rilke's case, poetry, just by looking at a thing and rendering it, you can plumb pretty deeply a lot of human mysteries.

Right, you generate the higher idea.

Yes, so its not so much about explicitly exploring an emotion on a page as it is about exploring a thing and seeing what that draws out in him. That's another thing that I love about Rilke! His sense of living in this world that is just teeming with *things*. As human beings it's all we have, really. We are these souls walking around in a world of objects and things and so how can we not have an incredibly intimate relationship to those things and how can they not tell us a great deal about ourselves.

And it would seem that you've carried that same aesthetic into both of your novels.

Oh really? I'm flattered to hear that.

The finished novel, *Lost Son*, is your exploration of the "thing" of Rilke's life and the times and places he lived in, especially Paris, and I can only imagine what a watershed those photos of Atget's must have been for you.

Yes, that's a perfect example of what we are talking about. And that's funny that you bring up William Carlos Williams, who was a physician, because Rilke always had this joke that started when he was with Lou. He would say well, if it gets to be that my poetry is basically destroying me because of what it puts me through, you know, I'll become a country doctor somewhere. And he came back to that constantly in his life, in his darkest periods. He would joke to himself, or he would joke to a friend in letters, maybe it's time to give up poetry and move to a small village and become a country doctor. It was like a fantasy that he held out for himself.

If a reader were to ask you what one important thing you would want him or her to take away from reading *Lost Son*, what would that be?

I love this quote by Lee Siegel that I use as an epigraph at the opening of the novel. It states the driving spirit of *Lost Son*: "We must understand one another or die. And we will never understand one another if we cannot understand the famous dead, those fragments of the past who sit half buried and gesturing to us on memory's contested shores." When we inherit these legendary poet figures and we're given their work and their lives, we can take them and try our best to interpret and understand them. But it remains a fact that there are going to be really complex, ultimately unanswerable questions raised by that work and that life. There's a real value in dwelling upon this kind of life and exploring the questions that it raises, and exploring the tensions within the life and the conflicts that were created within the life. It somehow helps our own humanity become something more expansive, more empathetic, when we can explore those things.

-- Interview conducted by Kay Callison

-- Listen to the podcast of Mark Cunningham on www.unbridledbooks.com

Questions for Discussion

1. What was your immediate response to this novel? Is there anything in your personal experience or of anyone you know that is similar to what happens in the novel? If so, how did that affect your reading of the novel? What do you think the title, *Lost Son*, means?
2. How would you describe the tone of the novel?

3. What is your response to the various settings of the novel? How successful, or not, do you think they are in creating a portrait of Rilke and the times he lived in? What do you think it was about Russia, for instance, that caused Rilke to think of it as his true homeland?
4. What does the author's use of Rilke's actual words from his poetry and correspondence add to your understanding of the novel's portrait of the poet? Do they add to your enjoyment of the novel? Why? Or why not? After reading the novel and the interview with Cunningham, do you have a sense of what Rilke's aesthetic – the "thing poem" – means?
5. What would you identify as some of the major tensions and conflicts within Rilke and between the characters in the novel?
6. How would you describe Rilke's relationship with his mother, and with his father? How do those relationships appear to affect his sense of being homeless, nationless?
7. If someone were to ask you to describe or explain Lou Andreas Salome and her relationship with Rilke, what would you tell them? After reading the novel and thinking about it, how would you assess her behavior towards Rilke over the years? Her feelings for him? Her behavior as a married woman living independent of her husband?
8. The author says that Rilke gravitated between Lou and Clara as between two magnetic poles. What do you think he means by that?
9. If someone were to ask you to describe or explain Rilke's wife, Clara, to them, what would you say? Are you convinced, from what we are allowed to see in the novel, that Clara is indeed "in synch" with Rilke's belief that they must live apart in order to pursue their respective careers? If so, why? If not, why not? What do her reactions and observations about Rodin's relationship with Madame Rodin suggest to you about her feelings towards Rilke, as a husband and father?
10. Think about the married relationships that Rilke observes during the novel. What does he see in them that relates to his own decisions about being a husband and father? How convinced are you by his perspective towards them? What is your reaction to the story of Paula Modersohn-Becker and Rilke's friendship with her?
11. The poet Robert Pinsky once said that if Rilke were to cut himself, he would bleed poetry. If someone were to ask you to describe or explain Rilke to them after reading this novel, what would you tell them? Would you find Pinsky's description helpful? If so, why? Or, why not?
12. Most if not all readers of **Lost Son** see the portrait of Rilke as one of a deeply flawed character who pays a great personal and moral price in his quest for Art. Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not? Remember, the author says that Rilke is adored as a saint by some, reviled by others. Do you fall into one of these two camps after reading the novel? If so, which one and why? If not, why not?
13. The author chose to end the novel with Rilke's military service in World War I and its immediate aftermath. Why do you think he might have done that?
14. Would you recommend this novel to someone else to read? If so, who, and why? If not, why not?

Recommended Reading

The Green Age of Asher Witherow, by M. Allen Cunningham.

Letters to a Young Poet, by Rainer Maria Rilke.

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, by Rainer Maria Rilke.

A Rining Glass, by Donald Prater (a biography of Rilke).

You Alone Are Real to Me: Remembering Rainer Maria Rilke, by Lou Andreas-Salome.

Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salome: The Correspondence, translators Edward Snow and Michael Winkler.

Pictures from Brueghel and other poems, by William Carlos Williams.

Paterson, Books 1-5, by William Carlos Williams.

Nietzsche's Kisses, by Lance Olsen

Angle of Repose, by Wallace Stegner

Wintering, by Kate Moses.

Girl in Hyacinth Blue, by Susan Vreeland.

The Unnatural History of Cypress Paris, by Elise Blackwell.