

# THE *Current*

July 1, 2025

Tom Jacobs

## **Louis Bayard brings ‘The Wildes’ to UCSB’s LAUNCH PAD series**

Everyone knows the story of Oscar Wilde. The legendary British playwright, renowned for his witty dialogue, was convicted of “gross indecency” in 1895, just months after the London premiere of his now-classic comedy “The Importance of Being Earnest.” He died five years later, and over time became a gay icon — a symbol of the oppressive morality of the Victorian era.

As Louis Bayard points out, that familiar narrative leaves out an important part of his story. Wilde was married, and the father of two sons. They, too, were victims of this tragedy.

“As a novelist, I am drawn to untold stories,” he said. “This is one of them. To show that he was a family man who was devoted to his wife and children is another form of outing. It’s a side of him most people don’t know.

“In effect, I wanted to give Constance and the boys a platform.”

Bayard did so in his critically acclaimed 2024 novel [“The Wildes”](#) – a work he is now adapting into a play. The Washington, D.C. resident will be at UC Santa Barbara in early July working with actors to refine the work-in-progress as part of the [LAUNCH PAD Summer Reading Series](#).

The workshop will culminate in a public reading of the play at 7 p.m. on July 10 in UCSB’s Studio Theatre. LAUNCH PAD founder and artistic director Risa Brainin will

direct. The free performance will be followed by a Q&A with the artists.

Anne Torsiglieri, a professor of drama and director of the BFA training program at UCSB's Department of Theatre and Dance provided the catalyst for Bayard's adaptation. She will play the role of Lady Wilde (Oscar's mother) in the reading.

"It was all Annie's idea," Bayard said. "She is very persuasive."

"Louis and I did theater together at Princeton, where he was a talented actor and writer," Torsiglieri recalled. "I've always adored Louis personally, and have read his brilliant novels voraciously, so I recommended 'The Wildes' for our book club, which Risa is also in.

"As soon as I began reading it, I wrote Louis and said 'You must turn this into a play!' By the time Risa had finished reading it, she came to the same conclusion." Not long thereafter, the duo got on the phone with Bayard and told him that if he wanted to write an adaptation, he was welcome to come to campus and spend a week working on it with theater professionals.

"I wrote the book in a five-act structure to try to imitate Oscar Wilde's plays," Bayard noted. "But it had never occurred to me to take the next logical step and turn it into a play."

Bayard is not a novice when it comes to dramatic writing. He wrote sketches in college, and a play he wrote during COVID was performed at a festival in Washington, D.C. "So I've seen my work up on stage," he said. "I get a buzz out of it!"

That said, "I don't know anything about this world," he added. "I don't know how to make a play happen. But I love the idea of making something better by collaborating with people. Writing is such a solitary profession. I am excited by the idea of sharing the journey with other folks."

Bayard is perhaps best known for his novel "The Pale Blue Eye," which was made into a movie for Netflix starring Christian Bale. The genesis of "The Wildes" can be traced back to the 1997 Wilde biopic that starred Stephen Fry and Jude Law.

"I remember that the character of Constance, Wilde's wife, puzzled me," he said. "In the movie, she really has nothing to do but look sad. I was curious about what kind

of woman Oscar Wilde would have married, and what kind of woman would marry Oscar Wilde.

“The more I learned about her, the more interesting she became. The fact she was an intellectual, a writer, a progressive reformer who wanted to liberate women from their corsets. She was a feminist before the word entered the language. They were a very bohemian couple. I thought that was very interesting.”

The more Bayard researched the Wilde family, the more fascinated he became. But he still wasn't sure he wanted to write a novel about this very unhappy clan.

“Because the story is so sad, I wasn't sure that I wanted to dwell in that basement for the two years it takes me to push a novel out to the world,” he said. “Then I thought about Oscar's plays, and how they constantly navigate between tragedy and comedy, melodrama and farce. I thought, those things are actually cousins of each other.

“That was really freeing. It meant that I, and the readers, could have a good time on the page — and descend into sorrow as necessary.”

After coming to that realization, he wrote the book “in a kind of high-comedy register,” he said. “Even in the midst of these very sad events, the characters are speaking in the kind of way people only do in plays. It's an attempt to pay homage to that Wildean wit, which pervades all his work.”

Given that the book is so dialogue-heavy, a stage adaptation seems like it would spring forth fairly easily. Not so, according to the author.

“I was hoping I could just transport the dialogue from the book to the stage,” he said. “But it's a full-length novel — one of epic scale that travels across generations and continents. It's a real challenge figuring out what has to stay and what can go. I'm constantly asking: ‘Can I get rid of this character? Can I lose this moment?’ I'm still figuring it out while we're in workshop.”

Even with that stress, Bayard is very much looking forward to his week in Santa Barbara.

“It's all about making it better,” he said. “There's no better acid test than putting it up there and having actors try it out. You can't possibly know if it works until then.”

As Oscar Wilde knew very well.

This is the 20<sup>th</sup> season of LAUNCH PAD, and the 10<sup>th</sup> season of the Summer Reading Series. “The Wildes” is the series’ third and final play. Melinda Lopez’s “Standing Still” will be read July 3. Admission to all readings is free, but reservations are recommended. For more information, go to

<https://launchpad.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/>.

Tags

[Books](#)

Media Contact

**Debra Herrick**

Associate Editorial Director

(805) 893-2191

[debraherrick@ucsb.edu](mailto:debraherrick@ucsb.edu)

---

## About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.