

THE AMERICAN HEIRESS

by Daisy Goodwin

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An excerpt from *Titled Americans* © 1890

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Biography and Conversation

MIKE HOGAN



Daisy Goodwin is the daughter of film producer Richard B. Goodwin (*A Passage to India*, *Seven Years in Tibet*) and writer/interior designer Jocasta Innes (*Paint Magic*), and the sister of the Edgar-winning writer Jason Goodwin (*The Janissary Tree*). She earned a B.A. with honors in

history from Trinity College, Cambridge, followed by a Harkness Fellowship to Columbia University Film School; and now runs her own independent television company in the UK.

In addition to publishing eight poetry anthologies, she has presented award-winning television series on poetry and on the enduring appeal of romantic fiction, and is a commentator and columnist for the London *Sunday Times*. In 2010, she served as chair of the judging panel for the Orange Prize for the best novel written in English by a woman. Daisy lives in London with two daughters, three dogs, and a husband who is an executive for ABC News. *The American Heiress* is her first novel.

What was the inspiration for *The American Heiress*?

I was visiting Blenheim Palace and saw the portrait of Consuelo Vanderbilt, the American heiress who married the Duke of Marlborough. She was very beautiful, but she also looked spectacularly unhappy. When I read that she was basically blackmailed into marrying the Duke by her social-climbing mother, I thought about what a great setup this would be for a novel. American girls basically propped up the English aristocracy for a generation. In modern terms, Consuelo's dowry was about \$100 million.

"American girls basically propped up the English aristocracy for a generation."



No wonder a quarter of the British nobility made transatlantic marriages!

I started writing this book at the height of the boom (remember the boom?), when I was fascinated by the parallels between all these new billionaires and the plutocrats of the Gilded Age. How does getting rich that fast affect you? It has to be said, though, that the rich today are small fry compared to the Vanderbilts and their ilk, whose idea of a party favor was a jewel-encrusted Fabergé egg, and who would offer their guests cigarettes rolled from hundred-dollar bills.

Was there anything you found especially surprising while researching *The American Heiress*?

While certain details in *The American Heiress* might seem unbelievable, like the solid gold on the corset that Cora Cash wears on her wedding day, her trousseau is a replica of Consuelo Vanderbilt's. At her wedding to the Duke, Consuelo carried orchids that had been grown in the greenhouses of Blenheim and then shipped to New York in a specially refrigerated chamber because Marlborough brides always carried flowers from Blenheim. When I borrowed the detail about Cora's bouquet being brought over from England for my novel, my editor produced her red pencil and said, "This can't possibly be true." But in fact, you would have to have a very vivid imagination indeed to match the real extravagance and excess of the Gilded Age. Just as contemporary starlets are written about in the media today, every detail of Consuelo's wedding was chronicled in *Vogue*.

How typical was Cora Cash's experience for an American marrying an English nobleman?

Girls like Consuelo Vanderbilt came to England thinking it would be the height of sophistication.

*About the
Author*

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But for many of these American brides, a title really didn't make up for the horrors of English country life. A dollar princess frequently found herself isolated and miserable in a great pile of a house that, however exquisite, was miles away from anywhere, with no heating apart from open fires and—horror of horror—no bathrooms. One titled American bride wrote home to her mother that she hadn't taken her furs off all winter even when she went to bed. Another heiress gave up going to dinner at people's country houses because she couldn't bear the arctic temperatures in an evening dress. And English society was not exactly welcoming to these rich newcomers: Imagine Kim Kardashian marrying Prince Harry today and you get the general idea of the suspicion and disdain that the Americans encountered.

Those of you who enjoyed the Masterpiece Theatre series *Downton Abbey* will remember that the Earl of Grantham married an American heiress (also called Cora) whose dowry saved the family estate from ruin. But *Downton Abbey* is set twenty years after *The American Heiress*. By that time even the stuffiest English aristocrats had realized that American money had stopped the roof leaking. In *Downton Abbey*, when Cora, Countess of Grantham, wonders whether a potential suitor for her daughter comes from an old family, her mother-in-law, played by Maggie Smith, retorts, "Older than yours, I imagine." And even the Countess's own daughter, Lady Mary, dismisses her mother by saying, "You wouldn't understand. You're American."

The traces of these American girls are everywhere in Britain today; most people know that Winston Churchill's mother was American, but the great-grandmother of Princess Diana was also an American heiress.



What kind of experience was writing this book for you?

People are always asking me, how do you find time to write a book—when you run a company, write for the newspapers, have a family (and three dogs), etc.? My answer to this is noise-cancelling headphones. Once I plug these in, I can write anytime, anywhere. A great deal of this novel was written on trains, planes, and in between meetings.

I absolutely loved writing *The American Heiress*. To be able to escape into a world full of beautiful frocks and perfectly trained servants was a joy.

Who are some of your favorite writers?

What authors have influenced your work?

I love Edith Wharton and Henry James, and anyone familiar with their work will see echoes in *The American Heiress*. I also admire Daphne du Maurier for the way she handles suspense and Sarah Waters for her utter command of historical period. I really enjoyed Julian Fellowes's books for the way they dissect snobbery, and Hilary Mantel is an extraordinary writer both for her present-day and period novels.

*Behind the
Novel*



Special Excerpt

When Daisy Goodwin was researching *The American Heiress*, she discovered that rich American girls (and their mothers) who were seeking a match with an English lord would typically start by consulting the quarterly publication, *Titled Americans*, which listed all the eligible titled bachelors still on the market, with a handy description of their age, accomplishments, and prospects.

The following is an excerpt from
Titled Americans © 1890

WHY ENGLISH NOBLEMEN SEEK AMERICAN BRIDES

CHAUNCEY M. DEPEW'S VIEWS
ON THE SUBJECT

“Why do Englishmen select American wives?” was asked the silver-tongued orator, Mr. Chauncey M. Depew, who submitted himself graciously to a reporter’s inquisition on the subject of paramount interest and continuous discussion since the Endicott-Chamberlain wedding.

“Do you think I can answer that question without getting up another war with England? If I may express my opinion, without shattering the international treaty, I should say that the American girl has the advantage of her English sister in that she possesses all that the other lacks. This is due to the different methods in which the two girls are brought up. An English girl is, as a rule, brought up very strictly, kept under rigid discipline, sees nothing of society until formally brought out, is not permitted to think or act for herself, or allowed to display any individuality.



As a result, she is shy, self-conscious, easily embarrassed, has little or no conversation, and needs to be helped, lifted. The English young man has not the helpful qualities that characterize the typical American masher, and, in consequence, the two present, as I have often seen them, a very helpless combination. Then the American girl comes along, prettier than her English sister, full of dash, and snap, and go, sprightly, dazzling, and audacious, and she is a revelation to the Englishman. She gives him more pleasure in one hour, at a dinner or ball, than he thought the universe could produce in a whole life-time. Speedily he comes to the conclusion that he must marry her or die. As a rule he belongs to an old and historic family, is well educated, traveled, and polished, but poor. He knows nothing of business, and to support his estate requires an increased income. The American girl whom he gets acquainted with has that income, so in marrying her he goes to heaven and gets—the earth.”



A CAREFULLY COMPILED LIST OF PEERS
WHO ARE SUPPOSED TO BE EAGER TO LAY THEIR
CORONETS, AND INCIDENTALLY
THEIR HEARTS, AT THE FEET OF THE
ALL-CONQUERING AMERICAN GIRL.

LORD ASHTOWN.

Is third Baron.

The entailed estates are at Woodlawn, County Galway, and at Kilfinane, County Limerick, Ireland. They yield but a small income, in consequence of the agricultural distress in Ireland.

*Behind the
Novel*

Lord Ashtown is twenty-two years old, and was educated at Eton.

Family seat: Lotherton Hall, Milford Junction, Ireland.

THE EARL OF AVA.

Eldest son and heir of the first Marquis of Dufferin.

The entailed estates amount to 18,200 acres, but owing to mortgages do not yield their nominal value of \$100,000 income.

Lord Ava, who is twenty-six years of age, is a lieutenant in the 17th Lancers.

Family seat: Clondeboye, County Down, Ireland.

LORD BENNET.

Eldest son and heir of the sixth Earl of Tankerville.

The entailed estates amount to 31,000 acres, yielding an income of \$150,000.

The Earl owns the only herd of wild cattle to be found in Great Britain.

Lord Bennet, who has at present nothing but a very small allowance, has served in the navy and in the army, and is thirty-six years of age.

Family seat: Chillingham Castle, Northumberland.





Recommended Reading

The Shuttle by Frances Hodgson Burnett

A gloriously over-the-top story of a wicked English aristocrat and an American bride.

The Buccaneers by Edith Wharton

Wharton's last novel, which she left unfinished, but is wonderful nonetheless. The Buccaneers are four American girls who take English society by storm in the 1880s.

The Duke's Children by Anthony Trollope

The last in the Palliser series; it has an American heroine.

Consuelo and Alva Vanderbilt: The Story of a Daughter and a Mother in the Gilded Age
by Amanda Mackenzie Stuart

Great double biography of Consuelo Vanderbilt, who married the 9th duke of Marlborough in 1895, and her formidable mother, Alva. I found this book very helpful when I was writing
The American Heiress.

The Glitter and the Gold by Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan
Consuelo's memoirs. She doesn't tell the whole story, of course, but it is full of fabulous

Downton Abbey—type detail.

The Pursuit of Love by Nancy Mitford

The English aristocracy from the inside.

The Go-Between by L. P. Hartley

A brilliant novel of the Edwardian summer of 1910.

Reading
Group
Gold



Keep on
Reading



Reading Group Questions

1. What is your initial impression of Cora Cash?
How does she develop as a person in the course of the novel?
2. In America, Cora is clearly at the top of society, while Bertha is very near the bottom. In what ways do their circumstances change when they move to England?
3. What role do the mothers in the story—Mrs. Cash, Mrs. Van Der Leyden, and the Double Duchess—play in the central characters' lives?
4. Cora is always aware that “no one was unaffected by the money.” How does the money affect Cora herself? What are the pleasures and perils of great wealth?
5. What is your opinion of Teddy and the Duke?
What about Charlotte?
6. What do you think about Cora's decision at the end of the book? Would you have made the same choice? (The author has said she was of two minds up until the last chapter.)
7. What are the differences between the Old World and the New in the novel? Do both worlds seem remote in the twenty-first century, or do you see parallels to contemporary society?



8. Why do modern readers enjoy reading novels about the past? Take a moment to discuss your experiences as a reader of historical fiction, in general, and of *The American Heiress* in particular.
9. When she was chair of the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2010, Daisy Goodwin wrote a controversial essay lamenting the “unrelenting grimness” of so many of the novels and pointing out that “generally great fiction contains light and shade”—not only misery but joy and humor. What do you think about Daisy’s argument that “it is time for publishers to stop treating literary fiction as the novelistic equivalent of cod-liver oil: if it’s nasty it must be good for you”?
10. *Kirkus Reviews* called *The American Heiress* a “shrewd, spirited historical romance with flavors of Edith Wharton, Daphne du Maurier, and Jane Austen.” Other critics have also seen echoes of Henry James. If you have read any of these earlier novelists, what parallels and differences do you see in Daisy’s work?

Discussion Questions