



## American Duchess: A Novel of Consuelo Vanderbilt

*Karen Harper*

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Before Meghan and Harry, another American ‘princess’ captured the hand of an English aristocrat. Now, Karen Harper tells the tale of Consuelo Vanderbilt, her “The Wedding of the Century” to the Duke of Marlborough, and her quest to find meaning behind “the glitter and the gold.”

On a cold November day in 1895, a carriage approaches St Thomas Episcopal Church on New York City’s Fifth Avenue. Massive crowds surge forward, awaiting their glimpse of heiress Consuelo Vanderbilt. Just 18, the beautiful bride has not only arrived late, but in tears, yet her marriage to the aloof Duke of Marlborough proceeds. Bullied into the wedding by her indomitable mother, Alva, Consuelo loves another. But a deal was made, trading some of the vast Vanderbilt wealth for a title and prestige, and Consuelo, bred to obey, realizes she must make the best of things.

At Blenheim Palace, Consuelo is confronted with an overwhelming list of duties, including producing an “heir and a spare,” but her relationship with the duke quickly disintegrates. Consuelo finds an inner strength, charming everyone from debutantes to diplomats including Winston Churchill, as she fights for women’s suffrage. And when she takes a scandalous leap, can she hope to attain love at last...?

From the dawning of the opulent Gilded Age, to the battles of the Second World War, *American Duchess* is a riveting tale of one woman’s quest to attain independence—at any price.

## American Duchess: A Novel of Consuelo Vanderbilt Details

Date : Published February 26th 2019 by William Morrow Paperbacks

ISBN : 9780062748331

Author : Karen Harper

Format : Paperback 357 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Adult Fiction



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## From Reader Review American Duchess: A Novel of Consuelo Vanderbilt for online ebook

### Maureen Timerman says

I enjoyed this historical fiction story of Consuelo Vanderbilt and we walk in her shoes as she journeys her life, and although being born with the preverbal silver spoon, we see her trials and accomplishments up close through the eyes of the author.

Now I'll admit I did Google Consuelo, and the story follows the time line, only we are with her and her thoughts.

What a life this woman lived, and loved how she was able to forgive those who had hurt her, and was always giving to those less fortunate.

A don't miss book for the new year, and your enjoyment!

I received this book through Edelweiss and the Publisher William Morrow, and was not required to give a positive review

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### Miriam says

A fascinating fictionalized biography / memoir of Consuelo Vanderbilt, one of many American heiresses who were married to British (and European) aristocrats who slowly, or quickly, going broke in the late nineteenth century.

Karen Harper brings to life this charming and strong-willed woman, a woman of money and substance. She makes readers fall in love with Consuelo Vanderbilt through her passion for life and for others. Told in the first person, the reader feels as though Consuelo Vanderbilt is sitting in her parlor telling of her life, her loves, and her desires. Throughout, readers learn about Britain and the lives of the aristocracy from the end of the Victorian era through WWII, particularly the relationship between the land owners and their tenants.

There's never a dull moment, never a doubt that Consuelo will fight for what she wants using her money and her wits to do so.

This is the perfect book for a grey winter day, for Anglophiles, and for lovers of historical fiction.

Another engaging hit for Karen Harper who continues to write history, mystery, and thrillers in Columbus, OH.

Here's a short synopsis of the book. Consuelo Vanderbilt was married to the Duke of Marlborough in 1895. She brought a huge dowry, a yearly stipend for herself, and a lifetime stipend for the duke. While the alliance was a financial success, it was not a happy marriage. Consuelo gave this cold, unemotional duke an "heir and a spare" but their relationship didn't warm much. Consuelo's passion for charity, for making the world better for others clashed with the Duke's resulting in more than a decade of separation before a painful divorce. Throughout out it all, Winston Churchill, the Duke's cousin, was Consuelo's friend, a friendship that lasted their entire lives.

After the divorce, Consuelo married Jacques Balsan, head of a French Woolen Franchise, a balloon pilot then

fighter pilot in WWI and aeronautical-military attache in WWII. They were madly in love and had been since her debut in 1893. He flew while she gave unstintingly to charity and the welfare of children. The love match worth waiting for.

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### **MaryBeth's Bookshelf says**

Historical fiction is my favorite genre, especially when it contains The Gilded Age, family money, and England. American Duchess is the story of Consuelo Vanderbilt, who was forced (literally) by her mother Alva to marry the Duke of Marlborough. It was the "in" thing during this time for American Heiresses to jump the pond to find husbands with titles. I found the book interesting, but it went so fast, barely delving into the characters and their lives. It read a bit like a romance that had some historical fiction components to it.

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### **v says**

#freebook Thank you @williammorrowbooks @harpercollinsus for this copy to review.

Perhaps Consuelo Vanderbilt was one of figures of the Gilded Age who deserved the most sympathy. Her mother Alva, famously married her off to the 9th Duke of Marlborough in exchange for a title. The Duke leapt at the chance to marry a rich American heiress to boost his sagging wealth and in order to maintain his estate Blenheim Palace. Consuelo, just 18 years old and in love with another man, was late to wedding and walked down the aisle red eyed from crying. Consuelo's marriage helped her mother's social status after her scandalous divorce, because society couldn't ignore a woman whose daughter was married to English aristocracy. Once mistress of Blenheim Palace, Consuelo was expected to not only host royalty, but to produce "an heir and a spare," a phrase that she is credited with. But once free of her mother, Consuelo comes into her own and finds the determination to change the course of her life.

After reading about Alva Vanderbilt in Therese Anne Fowler's *A Well Behaved Woman*, I was really excited to get a copy of *American Duchess*. They were both amazing women, using their wealth to forge independent lives, and to also help further the rights of women. Despite their strained relationship over Consuelo's marriage, they worked together as leaders in the suffrage movement. Consuelo was particularly charitable with her abundance of wealth. The author has Consuelo narrate; taking you from her marriage to the dawning of WW2, covering some very interesting history, including her friendship with Winston Churchill.

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### **Racine Zackula says**

I am an Anglophile and love historical fiction, so this book description is right up my alley. Consuelo Vanderbilt was someone I had never read about and the "dollar brides" era is interesting as American heiresses went over to Europe to acquire the sheen of royalty. It was an okay read but after a while, the author's style of "telling" and not "showing" wore on me. Consuelo is in a loveless marriage, so show me how bad her husband was. Beauty surrounded her, but it was not vividly painted with words. How long into the twenties did she wait to bob her hair? When did she shed her corset? Did she have close female friends? Why not? Did this make her feel lonely? Is this why she latches onto philanthropy? The other thing that was

off is that Consuelo's good is shown off, but she is never in the wrong. I will book talk this one to my older patrons who love the cozier stories.

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### **Joan Happel says**

Harper's sweeping and engaging story of the life of Consuelo Vanderbilt will draw you in with the first lines. Consuela is forced by her mother, the ambitious Alva Vanderbilt, into a loveless marriage with Charles Richard John Spencer-Churchill (known as Sunny to all), this biographical novel spans the dawn of the Gilded-Age to World War II. One of the so-called "Dollar Princesses", Consuela's marriage brings a fortune to Sunny for his beloved Blenheim and a title for Consuela to please her social climbing mother. After producing the "heir and a spare" required of her, Consuela turns her attention and fortune to the plight of the poor and especially women and children. Eventually, she leaves her husband and establishes herself as an independently strong woman, first in London and later in France.

American Duchess is a well-researched and immersive novel that will appeal to fans of historical and biographical fiction as well as fans of Downton Abbey and the royal family. I highly recommend this enchanting novel!

Thank you to edelweiss.plus for the advanced reader's galley.

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### **Katie/Doing Dewey says**

Summary: The settings and the main character were wonderful, but the writing was uneven.

Consuelo Vanderbilt's marriage to the Duke of Marlborough looked like a fairy tale from the outside. In reality, she was in love with someone else and apprehensive about moving to another country. She quickly decides to make the best of things though. Facing down her husband's disapproval, she uses her wealth and influence to give to charity and improve the lives of others. In the process, she gains many friends and becomes more confident in herself. She'll have to rely on both of those things when she chooses to take a scandalous step to shape the future she wants.

The writing in this book was a mix of good and bad. The main character's voice, especially her thoughts, completely won me over. She was a little bit snarky and melodramatic as a teen, gaining confidence in a believable character arc as time passed. The descriptions of places were also lovely. I felt transported to Consuelo's time. On the other hand, the dialogue was sometimes stiff and unconvincing. In both the dialogue and the narration, the introduction of background info often felt forced.

At least for the first half, I loved the main character. Her character arc was great. The way she stood up for herself and others was a lot of fun, almost a sort of wish fulfillment to read about. Towards the end, her story became more focused on romance. I enjoyed that a lot less. It was as though she'd spent all this time building up her own life and the ultimate goal was just to end up with the right guy. I certainly don't have any problem with romance, but I don't love when it's portrayed as the only important thing. It crowded out all of the other amazing things Consuelo was doing, such as her charity work during the war, which got much less time than I would have liked.

In general, there wasn't a ton of attention given to larger world events. I almost missed WWI happening! There were some great interactions with famous people though, from Winston Churchill to Edith Wharton. Consuelo's relationships with them were entertaining, as were several quotes I recognized. I did enjoy how light this book was, particularly following on the other books I've read recently. It was a smart selection of a story to tell too! The facts of Consuelo's life were certainly stranger than fiction, but probably were true given the combination of autobiography and several biographies that the author drew on. I would have enjoyed a note whether the author tweaked any of the facts though and that wasn't provided.

As a last small note, the author casually has Consuelo use the word 'retarded' when speculating about why a woman is quiet. It may have been a period-appropriate choice of words, but added nothing to the book so I'd have liked to see it skipped. Other than that, my main complaints were the lack of information about world events; the focus on romance at the end; and the uneven quality of the writing. However, I loved the setting, the main character, and her relationships enough that I'd definitely give the author another chance. This review was originally posted on Doing Dewey

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### **The Library Lady says**

This author apparently has a wide following, and if you like fluffed up historical fiction, you'll probably be a fan.

If on the other hand you like a little more than cardboard characters and weak dialogue--if you like books that are based on REAL people that make you feel as if you'd met them, and want to read more about them, just leave this one alone and move on.

P.S. Edith Wharton makes a cameo appearance here, and talks about writing a book she will call "The Buccaneers." She never finished it, but it was published as it was in 1938. Later Marian Mainwaring completed the book, and there was a splendid TV miniseries based on it, which you can find on YouTube. One of the characters is Consuelo, based not on Consuelo Vanderbilt, but on her godmother Consuelo Yznaga. Highly recommended.

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### **The Lit Bitch says**

4.5 stars

This novel I happened to see on one of my friend's Instagram and had immediate book envy! I absolutely love the cover and the novel itself sounded so intriguing!

Let me just rave about this cover art for just a moment. The orange hues are incredible and if I was walking thru a bookstore and saw this book, I would instantly grab it. The cover art is elegant and appealing, especially to a reader who loves this era (like me).

So, as it happened, I shamelessly begged for a copy of this book because I couldn't stand the thought of missing out on it. I only have basic knowledge of Consuelo Vanderbilt and was eager to learn more about one of America's icons.

Like many other readers, I think this book fit perfectly in with the most recent royal wedding of Meghan Markel and Prince Harry. I was primed to read something like this book not just because I loved the royal wedding, but I loved the idea of an American marry into British royalty. Plus the turn of the century is one of my favorite periods to read about so this was a book I was primed to love from the start.

For me, this was a little more on the fluffy side of historical fiction. There was of course historical facts and references woven into the narrative but the bulk of the story focuses on Consuelo as a person rather than her historical impact which was perfectly fine with me. Because of this, her triumphs and struggles all felt a little more personal to me.

I often found myself Googling little events and facts about Consuelo, she led a fascinating life and I couldn't get enough of her the more that I read this book. I absolutely detested the Duke of Marlborough, or Sunny as many called him. I felt so bad for her and was astonished that she persevered in a less than ideal situation.

I read this book much faster than I anticipated because I was completely taken in by the glitz and glamor of the heiress and the Duke. I couldn't help but stay up reading late into the night. The first person narrative was very fitting for this book and made it enjoyable to read and was fast paced. Like some other reviewers, I wish I had known how many years separated some events in the overall timeline, but in general I loved this book and would highly recommend it to anyone who loves historical fiction and all things royal!

See my full review [here](#)

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### **Meg - A Bookish Affair says**

"American Duchess" is the fascinating story of Consuelo Vanderbilt of the American Vanderbilts (yes, those ones!) who already lives a fairy tale life in the United States as part of one of the storied families of the Gilded Age. When she marries the Duke of Marlborough, her star rises even higher on both sides of the Atlantic. But this rise also feels more like a gilded cage than a gilded opportunity and Consuelo will have to work hard to cut out the life that she desires for herself.

Consuelo is a great character and I love that the story was told from her perspective. This really brought me into the story and made me care for Consuelo as a person. I had heard a little bit about her before reading this book but it was great to get more detail about her life. I thought the author did a really good job of balancing detail in the book but I wanted more.

I really enjoyed this book. The writing was good but there were definitely places where I wish there would have been some greater detail. It felt like we were only getting a taste of some of the subjects that could have used a little more investigation. This book was still satisfying but I definitely would love to read more about Consuelo in the future!

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### **Dallas Jo says**

I have been fascinated by the Vanderbilts and Blenheim Palace since the first time I visited Britain in the seventies. The American Duchess is entertaining and educational. I found myself searching for information to further my reading experience.

I strongly recommend this novel. I enjoyed The Royal Nanny, too and feel historical fiction is Karen Harper's forte. Can't wait to share this novel.

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### **Pat says**

Historical fiction is one of my favorite genres. It leads to learning more about the subject matter and characters after a fictional introduction. This book offers some interesting information about the practice of arranging marriages between British royalty and American wealth, in this case Consuelo Vanderbilt and the Duke of Marlborough. Blenheim Palace is often in the current news, and the descriptions of its interior were fascinating. I found the characters, however, to be one-dimensional and uninteresting with the exception of Winston Churchill's witticisms. Consuelo's infatuations, particularly with Jacques Balsan, read like a romance novel.

My thanks to Library Thing and the publisher for this ARC.

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### **Jo says**

American Duchess: A Novel of Consuelo Vanderbilt  
by Karen Harper

As the 19th century ended, the great aristocratic families of the UK began to struggle. A number disappeared, ruined by their expensive lifestyles, and the depression in agriculture – an estate's lifeblood – while others such as the Churchill's hung on for dear life.

On a cold November day in 1895, a carriage approaches St Thomas Episcopal Church on New York City's Fifth Avenue. Massive crowds surge forward, awaiting their glimpse of heiress Consuelo Vanderbilt. Just 18, the beautiful bride has not only arrived late, but in tears, yet her marriage to the aloof Duke of Marlborough proceeds. Bullied into the wedding by her indomitable mother, Alva, Consuelo loves another. But a deal was made, trading some of the vast Vanderbilt wealth for a title and prestige, and Consuelo, bred to obey, realizes she must make the best of things.

At Blenheim Palace, Consuelo is confronted with an overwhelming list of duties, including producing an "heir and a spare," but her relationship with the duke quickly disintegrates. Consuelo finds an inner strength, charming everyone from debutantes to diplomats including Winston Churchill.

Karen Harper -seamlessly illustrates Consuelo's role and woman in general within society at that time. How women were changing boundary's through the woman's suffrage movement and how they were working to make real change happen.

This is the third book that I've read about dollar princess's lately and although this is an interesting story. 3.5 stars I found That Churchill woman and A Well Behaved Woman were more compelling. Both were more scandalous and salacious. - both are reviewed here.

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### **Shari Suarez says**

The story is pretty timely with Meghan Markle becoming an American duchess which will draw interest from readers. It will also draw interest because it's well-written and the subject is fascinating.

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### **Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says**

AMERICAN DUCHESS tales the fictional story of Consuelo Vanderbilt. In 1895 Consuelo wed the Duke of Marlborough. This was not a love match; she was already in love with another man. She only went to the altar after being bullied relentlessly by her mother, Alva. The marriage was a business deal—the Vanderbilt money for a title and the prestige that comes with the title. And, it could have all ended there. She could have stayed subdued like many other women in her class. However, Consuelo finds her inner strength, fights for the things she believes in and perhaps she will even find true love?

**READ THE REST OF THE REVIEW OVER AT FRESH FICTION!**

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