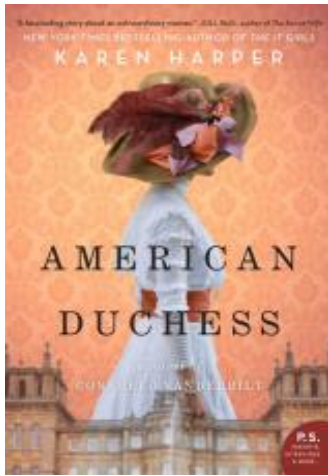


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# American Duchess: A Novel of Consuelo Vanderbilt

by Karen Harper

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## About the Book

**Before there was Meghan Markle, there was Consuelo Vanderbilt, the original American Duchess. Perfect for readers of Jennifer Robson and lovers of "Downton Abbey."**

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.

## Discussion Guide

1. How does Consuelo's American democratic background vs. the duke's aristocratic one merge or clash in the story? Should she have handled things differently? Why did the duke hate America?
2. Consuelo's handling of her mother over the years says a lot about both women. Should Consuelo just have cut her mother off after she was forced to marry the duke? Is Alva strictly a villain? Does she redeem her earlier conduct? Why do you think she acted so dictatorially?
3. Do you believe in love at first sight? We know Jacques claimed to, but does Consuelo show signs of this, too?
4. I could not have possibly made up a character like Gladys Deacon. Is she a sympathetic character or just the opposite? Can you understand her being unbalanced? Also, did you suspect she was after the duke? At what point? Before Consuelo realized it? Why didn't she catch on right away?
5. Is it wrong for parents to favor one child over another, or is it understandable or permissible? Why did Consuelo favor Ivor? Did she try to make up for those feelings by bolstering Bert? Have you seen or experienced parents who do this? Also, in what ways did Winston favor Ivor?
6. What does Mrs. Prattley mean to Consuelo? Something beyond mere charity? Why does Consuelo continue to think of the old lady over the years?
7. How much do early relationships affect us in adulthood? How did her governess, Miss Harper, have an impact on Consuelo? What about the ill child she took presents to in her pony cart child at Idle Hour?
8. So many of us tend to see war that is distant from us in time or place in abstract generalities. Today's media close-up-and- personal coverage makes the human impact of war more real. How does Consuelo's contact with refugees make the impact of war hit home for her?
9. I knew quite a lot about Sarah Jennings, the first Duchess of Marlborough, because before I visited Blenheim, I had watched the excellent BBC series "The First Churchills." Sarah had quite a temper, almost as explosive as Alva's. Is her "ghost" hostile or friendly to Consuelo and why? Are you aware of any other cases of historic ghosts tied to their homes or to their great achievements?
10. Jacques Balsan's life greatly paralleled the history of early flight from hot-air balloons to war planes with bombs. Since Americans tend to focus on the Wright brothers, I was not aware that France was also key in the race toward modern flight. Did any other historical details surprise you in this novel? For example, I was amazed how many people of this era were divorced.
11. It seems that both Alva and Consuelo changed houses frequently. In what way were their surroundings an extension of themselves? Do you find this is also true about yourself in your choice of home and décor?

## **Author Bio**

*New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Karen Harper is a former Ohio State University instructor and high school English teacher. Published since 1982, she writes contemporary suspense and historical novels about real British women. Two of her recent Tudor-era books were bestsellers in the UK and Russia. Harper won the Mary Higgins Clark Award for *DARK ANGEL*, and her novel *SHATTERED SECRETS* was judged one of the best books of the year by *Suspense Magazine*.

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