

Daisy Goodwin on writing *The American Heiress*

I was visiting Blenheim Palace a few years ago and saw the portrait of Consuelo Vanderbilt, the American heiress, or “dollar princess,” who married the ninth Duke of Marlborough in 1895. 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 what a great setting this would be for a novel.

I started working on *The American Heiress* at the height of the economic boom (remember the boom?), when the newspapers and magazines were full of billionaires having fabulous parties on their diamond-encrusted yachts. But even the excesses of Trump or Abramovich pale in comparison with the consumption of America’s Gilded Age, when diners at one Newport mansion were invited to prospect with tiny silver shovels for real gems in the miniature river that ran down the center of the dining table.

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*.

In the late nineteenth century, American heiresses who fancied being called “my lady” subscribed to a periodical called *Titled Americans*—a pre-digital version of Match.com—that listed all the titled bachelors still on the market. The trade-off between money and titles was so successful that about a quarter of the members of the House of Lords in 1910 had American wives. American money probably kept the stately homes of England going for another generation.

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. 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.

For many of these American brides, however, 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. 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."

You will have to read *The American Heiress* to the last page to find out if Cora Cash wins her own particular War of Independence, but you can rest assured that every detail in the story, however outlandish, is grounded in fact.

DAISY GOODWIN is a leading television producer in the U.K. She has published several poetry anthologies, and was chair of the judging panel of the 2010 Orange Prize for Fiction. She and her husband, an ABC TV executive, have two daughters and live in London. *The American Heiress* is her first novel.

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