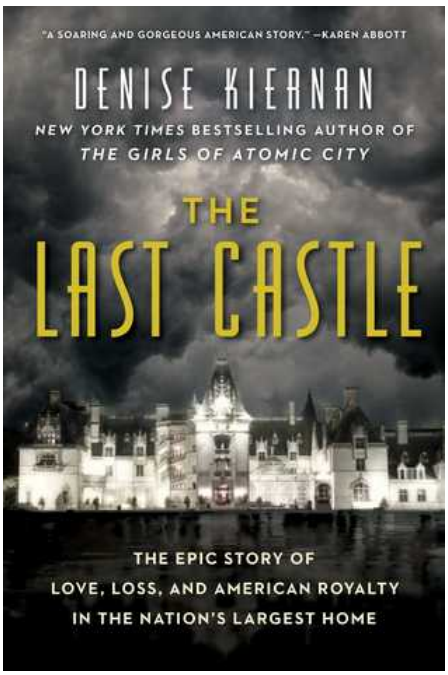

The Last Castle: The Epic Story of Love, Loss, and American Royalty in the Nation's Largest Home

Denise Kiernan

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The fascinating true story behind the magnificent Gilded Age mansion Biltmore—the largest, grandest residence ever built in the United States.

The story of Biltmore spans World Wars, the Jazz Age, the Depression, and generations of the famous Vanderbilt family, and features a captivating cast of real-life characters including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Teddy Roosevelt, John Singer Sargent, James Whistler, Henry James, and Edith Wharton.

Orphaned at a young age, Edith Stuyvesant Dresser claimed lineage from one of New York's best-known families. She grew up in Newport and Paris, and her engagement and marriage to George Vanderbilt was one of the most watched events of Gilded Age society. But none of this prepared her to be mistress of Biltmore House.

Before their marriage, the wealthy and bookish Vanderbilt had dedicated his life to creating a spectacular European-style estate on 125,000 acres of North Carolina wilderness. He summoned the famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to tame the grounds, collaborated with celebrated architect Richard Morris Hunt to build a 175,000-square-foot chateau, filled it with priceless art and antiques, and erected a charming village beyond the gates. Newlywed Edith was now mistress of an estate nearly three times the size of Washington, DC and benefactress of the village and surrounding rural area. When fortunes shifted and changing times threatened her family, her home, and her community, it was up to Edith to save Biltmore—and secure the future of the region and her husband's legacy.

The Last Castle is the uniquely American story of how the largest house in America flourished, faltered, and ultimately endured to this day.

The Last Castle: The Epic Story of Love, Loss, and American Royalty in the Nation's Largest Home Details

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From Reader Review The Last Castle: The Epic Story of Love, Loss, and American Royalty in the Nation's Largest Home for online ebook

Suzanne Mitchell says

What a disappointment!! There is nothing epic about this book and that is the letdown. There is just enough detail to think the book will pick up but it never happens. With the right author this could truly be an epic story but this was a book that was ard to pick up and finish.

Staceyann says

The author did not appear to have enough material about the Vanderbilt family to write a book, so latched on to everything that happened in North Carolina around this time period. I wouldn’t complain if this had been billed as a history of North Carolina, but a lot of the side stories had no connection to Biltmore or the Vanderbilts other than “it happened nearby.” The first half of the book was pretty good, but the second half (after George Vanderbilt died) was not compelling. She really did not have much information on the finances of the estate, just conjecture. I felt the book did not live up to its jacket.

John says

The 175,000 square foot Biltmore was constructed in the waning years of America's Gilded Age by the grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, George Vanderbilt, couched within his beloved mountains surrounding Asheville, N.C. Although the focus of this historical work is scheduled to be published at the end of September 2017 is the Biltmore Estate, the book also explores the mistress of the Biltmore Estate, George's wife who he married after its construction, who I believe had a larger presence in Asheville than her husband. Other dignities and their connection to the Vanderbilts discussed in this book included Richard Morris Hunt, Frederick Law Olmsted, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Singer Sargent. Having visited the Biltmore Estate twice and especially loving his personal library of approximately 24,000 books, I was interested in the origin of many of its furnishing. If you are an aficionado of the late 19th - early 20th century United States history, this needs to be a must read.

Emesskay says

This book is the biography of a building (or estate) - the Biltmore near Asheville North Carolina. It goes into great detail about how it came to be, the problems and how they were overcome, and how this wonderful example of gilded age architecture came to remain intact for future generations to enjoy. Much of the credit is due to the family that resided in the house (estate). It would have been easy to shut themselves away and ignore the locals, but they felt the need to give back to the community in which they were located.

The tale isn't just about the buildings and grounds, but it covers the lives of the people who resided there, and

how earlier experiences in their lives affected decisions that were made.

The book is extremely well researched, I feel I learned so much from reading it. Highly recommend for history buffs, or those just curious about how the Biltmore came to be and managed to stay.

Greg says

Disappointing, mostly because it never explains why George Vanderbilt would build it in the first place. I've been there numerous times (I was brought up within a few hours and this house was often part of vacation trips.) It's massive, but relatively pointless other than it's current function: a museum, and a ridiculously expensive one to visit ($65 to $85 as of November 2016). More flaws: here in the book, there is no single picture of an entire room (instead we see fireplaces of rooms in the library and the tapestry room), no blue prints (other than the end papers, which appear to contain blueprints of other houses). And the cover, so ridiculously ominous: it reminds me of a cover of a recently-read book that featured Gestapo headquarters in Germany in the 1940s. Yes, that ominous. Perhaps the family refused to allow Kiernan to include more pictures to increase visits. Given that tickets have been sold for a visit since the 1930s, you'd think that after millions of visitors over 80+ years would have allowed for more photos, especially during the construction itself. (I think Aaron Spelling, of TV production fame, built a house in the Hollywood Hills named the largest inhabited house, as the Biltmore is now a museum.) Recommended for hardcore "history-of-homes" readers in which case you've probably already been to the castle itself. And if you're going to take the family to a museum, great! Many are all over the place and free! And speaking of great houses, Winchester in California is NOT to be missed: weird and freaky.

Margaret Sankey says

Emblematic of the Vanderbilt family's cycle "from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations" (well, maybe "shirtsleeves to Anderson Cooper in three generations"), the estate at Biltmore was meant to be a semi-feudal estate, with European-style managed forests, dairies and local crafts. Instead, although it made an indelible impact on Asheville and the region, it quickly became a white elephant of expenses, impractical living and changed social mores. Kiernan follows the Vanderbilts and their in-laws from the 1860s through the present grand-grandchildren running the estate as a tourist attraction, with side lights about the Newport Season, Paris in the 1890s, the Arts and Crafts movement and Biltmore as a secret storage space for the national gallery during WWII.

Kim McGee says

The great Biltmore Estate which many consider an American castle was the vision of George Vanderbilt and continued by his wife, Edith. While the design and grounds changed a bit through the years one thing did not and that was their dream of the area being self sustaining. The village (or later town) that grew up beside it and where Edith created a cottage industry to keep the dream alive.
The history of Biltmore is so closely messed with what was happening in the rest of the country and abroad. We think we know the American royalty through Fitzgerald's and Wolfe's books but there were so many good deeds performed behind the scenes at Biltmore that few knew about. Kiernan gives us all the glory and the sad reality of what it took to keep this grande dame going. My thanks to the publisher for the advance

copy.

David Eppenstein says

I am giving this book a 3 star rating. To me that means it was a good book, nothing special but worth the price paid. I read some of the reviews of other GR members and it appears that some were rather disappointed in this book for a variety of reasons. I guess I can understand that feeling as I too was initially disappointed. I have visited Biltmore a couple of times but my last visit was nearly 20 years ago and curiosity got the better of me so I Googled the site and discovered that things have changed considerably since my last visit. I think tickets on my last visit were $35/person and now they are $65-75. Some changes are easier to accept than others I guess. Anyway I studied architecture in college with an emphasis on architectural history. Needless to say Biltmore was an item of discussion in my History of American Architecture course. So my primary interest in this book was the architecture and construction of Biltmore. From the title alone, and I should know better than this, one would expect this book to be solely about the house and therein is where my disappointment and that of the other GR members probably lies. This book is about more than the house, much more.

The book is about building a monument to a dying era and way of life and how that monument is transformed into an example of successful evolution. We are informed of George Washington Vanderbilt's life, a brief history of his family and the source of their wealth and George's place in that family and way of life. His decision to remove himself and his mother to the wilds of North Carolina to build this enormous edifice in the middle of no where is difficult to understand especially considering the daunting logistical challenges that the project entails. I would certainly have enjoyed reading about how those challenges were met but while the building of the house and the grounds is discussed it is not discussed in the detail the title would lead you to believe. I think it is fair to say that this book is not about the building of the house but about the process of building and the affects of building and the process on the owner and those around him and especially on the community in which this structure is sited.

As Biltmore is being constructed George is educated by those he has hired about new ideas and ways of advancing notions of preservation, forestry, agriculture, farming and the harnessing of natural resources. He, and later his bride Edith, become engaged in advancing local arts and crafts as a way of bringing economic growth and opportunity to the people that were now their neighbors. For this story the author goes on at length about Biltmore after the death of George. A good deal of the Biltmore story rightfully centers on George's widow Edith and her efforts to make Biltmore profitable once it becomes clear that the age of houses like Biltmore is a time past and not to return. She guides the house's transformation into something that will sustain it and keep it viable as the times change. From Edith the baton passed to her daughter, Cornelia and from her to Edith's grandsons the Cecil brothers. Today the house is still in the private ownership of the Cecil family and is a profitable and expensive tourist attraction of the City of Asheville. The book is titled "The Last Castle" but unlike the abandoned ruins of those castles of ages past this one has evolved and managed to stay alive and vital and an asset to its surrounding community. This is a history of more than a great house it is about a family and a community that all changed to meet the challenges life presented them with.

Touchstone Books says

Denise Kiernan is back and she's better than ever. Can't wait to share this one with you this Fall!

Erin says

3.5 Stars

The Last Castle is a book for serious history nerds like myself.
I haven't read Denise Kiernan's other book The Girls of Atomic City, but after reading The Last Castle I'll be pushing it up my TBR list. This book is a meticulously researched look at the building of the largest house of The Gilded Age, The Biltmore.

The Last Castle is a deep dive not only into the history of The Biltmore but also the legendary family behind it, The Vanderbilt's. Part family saga and part history of the early twentieth century. This book features cameos by Mark Twain, F.Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Teddy Roosevelt, Edith Wharton, Henry James, Henry Ford, The Wright Brothers, and Cholly Knickerbocker.(If you don't know who these people are, this book is not for you. But also Google them).

The Last Castle is the story of The Gilded Age and all of its excesses.

Lorna says

The Last Castle is an epic story about Biltmore House envisioned and built by George Cornelius Vanderbilt, the grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, during the Gilded Age with the history of Biltmore Estate then spanning the Jazz Age, the Depression and two World Wars.

Vanderbilt knew when he first got off the train in Ashville, North Carolina and gazed at the Pisgah peaks nestled among the Blue Ridge Mountains and Smokey Mountains of southern Appalachia that this was the perfect location for his sprawling and massive estate. Consulting architects, landscape architects, interior designers, worked with Vanderbilt to build Biltmore Estate. After Vanderbilt married Edith Stuyvessant Dresser, they spent much time at Biltmore House, the home where their daughter Cornelia was born. Dedicated to charitable activities, Edith Vanderbilt oversaw the beginning of Biltmore Estate Industries dedicated to local crafts and products, including a school. Throughout the history of Biltmore Estate, was mention of F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Whistler, Thomas Wolfe, Teddy Roosevelt, John Singer Sargent, Henry James and Edith Wharton.

Following the death of George Vanderbilt, Edith was forced to manage the sprawling estate and holdings to preserve her husband's vision and legacy. The estate forest land consisting of thousands of acres, was given to the federal government to form Pisgah National Forest. It should be noted that Pisgah Forest was the first experiment in scientific forestry. Biltmore Estate today is open to the public. Seeing it only from afar, I will make a point of spending a day at Biltmore Estates on our next trip through North Carolina.

Martha Mason says

Disappointing

If one judges a book solely on the basis of the epic amount of research that went into its writing this book might be judged a success. The amount of detail presented is prodigious.
But taken as a whole the book, to me at least, is flat, repetitive and boring. George Vanderbilt is an unknown quantity. His reasons for building a monstrously large and unwieldy house, far beyond his needs, are never explained. The French chateaux upon which Biltmore House was modelled had a raison d'etre. They were huge but they were also hugely occupied. Residents usually included extended family plus their staff, domestic and other and even contingents of the military. Other than times when the Vanderbilts were entertaining, much of the main house remained empty. It is only now, when it is filled with fee-paying gawkers, that the house stays occupied.
The person of Edith Dresser is less enigmatic than her husband but without the injection of some "imagined" conversations such as those employed by chroniclers like Erik Larson, she, along with everyone else in the book remains two-dimensional at best.
MS. Kiernan takes us on many side expeditions, introducing us to a multitude of characters some of whom have little or nothing to do with Biltmore House. Of what importance are F. Scott Fitzgerald's final inebriated days? Why must we be inundated with myriad distant Vanderbilt family members whose existence has little or no bearing on the story of Biltmore House? They are simply distractions.
The final result is a book that is neither epic nor is it truly a "story of love, loss and American royalty."
It is a boring, dry and repetitive tale of one man's unrealistic great expectations.
In my opinion three stars is generous. But the author gets kudos for her research.

Cindy Burnett says

The Last Castle is a phenomenal read. When I went to school in North Carolina years ago, I visited Biltmore House several times so as soon I learned about this book, I was dying to read it. I am so glad it lived up to my expectations. Denise Kiernan chronicles the tale of George Vanderbilt, the man who ultimately built the largest residence ever constructed in the United States – 175,000 square feet on 125,000 acres of rugged wilderness. Biltmore House contains 250 rooms in all including: 33 bedrooms, 43 bathrooms, 3 kitchens, 2 bowling alleys, an indoor pool, and a library with 65 fireplaces to supplement the complicated heating system necessary to keep the house warm in the winter. In The Last Castle, Kiernan comprehensively describes how Biltmore House came into existence from George’s first purchase of land in the Asheville, North Carolina area to the final completion and opening of the Music Room in 1976 long after the home became a tourist destination. With the confidence and financial cluelessness of someone who inherited untold wealth, George Vanderbilt never worried about funds nor created any type of budget within which those assisting with the building had to adhere. As a result, Biltmore House was incredibly expensive to erect and subsequently operate, and as a result, it severely and irreparably impacted the family’s finances. Numerous rooms were not completed, and plans for various parts of the property abandoned. As I read about the process of building Biltmore House, I found it very hard to imagine undertaking such a project with little or no budget planning.

While George had the idea to build Biltmore House and hired the various individuals to implement his idea, Edith is the individual who protected both Biltmore House and the Asheville area and ensured that her husband’s legacy would remain. She was devoted to the area and the Biltmore’s employees. I found Edith fascinating and was pleased that Kiernan devoted substantial pages to Edith’s story. She lived for a long time after George died and left quite a legacy of her own.

Not only does Denise Kiernan thoroughly and thoughtfully recreate the timeline for and the process that went into the building of Biltmore House, she also places this monumental endeavor into its historical

context. Adding historical context is either skillfully accomplished or haphazardly included in a manner that makes the story disjointed and hard to follow. Thankfully, Kiernan masterfully incorporates the history of both the Vanderbilt family and George's wife Edith Stuyvesant Dresser's family, events such as the sinking of the Titanic and the Lusitania, both World Wars, the development of Forestry Programs (such as the one developed at Biltmore House), and the impact of the Great Depression; I never found myself wondering why a topic was being addressed or how I was suddenly reading about some new subject. The Last Castle flows beautifully, and I learned copious amounts of information about both the Vanderbilts and Biltmore House and in addition the decades spanned by the building of this magnificent mansion.

The book abounds with fascinating facts and details from the late 1800's to the death of George and Edith's daughter Cornelia's death in 1976. The highlights for me were the descriptions of John Singer Sargent painting various portraits at Biltmore House, the innovative refrigeration, wiring and elevator systems installed at the house, that Teddy Roosevelt was visiting Biltmore House when the idea for the teddy bear came about, and that Edith's second marriage was to Elbridge Gerry, the individual who inspired the term "gerrymandering". I also was unaware that George and Edith had almost traveled on the Titanic but chosen last minute to take an earlier ship. The historical information included in the book was a true highlight for me.

The Last Castle provides a glimpse into the Gilded Age, an era of excess and untold wealth, and one man's decision to build the grandest home in the United States. I highly recommend this fabulous book. Thanks to Touchstone and Goodreads Giveaways for the chance to read this ARC. All opinions are my own.

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

"Half the pleasure in life comes from learning to choose between things."-William Osgood Field

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Cyndi says

I'm not exactly sure how a book can be interesting and boring all at the same time, but this one achieved that strange balance.