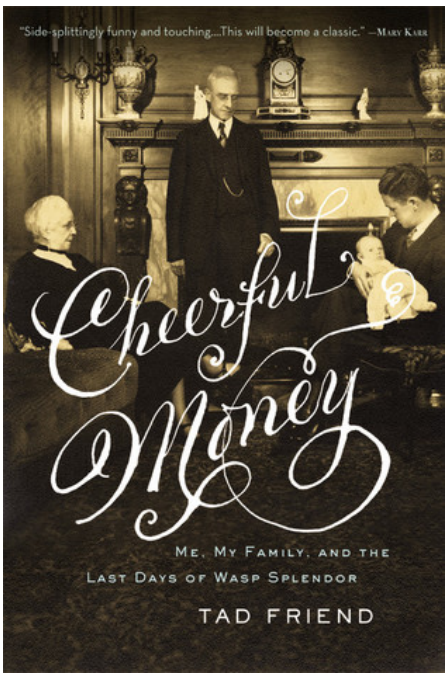

Cheerful Money: Me, My Family, and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor

Tad Friend

Cheerful Money: Me, My Family, and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor

Tad Friend

Cheerful Money: Me, My Family, and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor Tad Friend
Tad Friend's family is nothing if not illustrious: his father was president of Swarthmore College, and at Smith his mother came in second in a poetry contest judged by W.H. Auden--to Sylvia Plath. For centuries, Wasps like his ancestors dominated American life. But then, in the '60s, their fortunes began to fall. As a young man, Tad noticed that his family tree, for all its glories, was full of alcoholics, depressives, and reckless eccentrics. Yet his identity had already been shaped by the family's age-old traditions and expectations. Part memoir, part family history, and part cultural study of the long swoon of the American Wasp, *Cheerful Money* is a captivating examination of a cultural crack-up and a man trying to escape its wreckage.

Cheerful Money: Me, My Family, and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor Details

Date	:	Published September 21st 2009 by Little, Brown and Company (first published September 2nd 2009)
ISBN	:	9780316003179
Author	:	Tad Friend
Format	:	Hardcover 368 pages
Genre	:	Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography, Biography Memoir

From Reader Review Cheerful Money: Me, My Family, and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor for online ebook

Josh Friedlander says

A warm, fuzzy and familiar sweater of a book. Friend's spiel is essentially that he comes from American nobility, a venerable WASP clan that primed him for greatness exactly at the moment that its empire was crumbling under the blows of meritocracy and transparency. (Crumbling, though even today one supposes, not completely crumbled.) But in practice this book is a regular family memoir, told with sensitivity, nostalgia and affection, though not bereft of criticism. Friend exemplifies the positive traits of his, uh, ethnicity? clan? cohort? - but is keenly aware of the negatives - scandals kept secret, bad marriages, repression, racism, alcoholism. Meandering through the story of his privileged upbringing, stopping to examine childhood homes, back-stories of minor relatives, fizzled relationships and lost years: in the hands of a lesser writer, this could become quite a drag. But Friend is a gifted writer, wielding his intelligence carefully, and writing with kindness, wit and an understated grace. So the story starts to feel almost like a lost memory, on a lawn by the beach, where the reader came of age, feeling the ocean swell and the sting of homesickness with each turn of the page.

Sarah says

This book is really hard for me to rate. I'm afraid I can't agree with many of the illustrious blurbs on the back cover--I didn't find it stunning or especially moving, and I didn't find it funny, humorous OR hilarious, as it was variously called. Graydon Carter said it "goes down like a bittersweet late-summer cocktail made with a jigger of Cheever and a splash of Wodehouse." Now this is an unbearably awesome phrase, and I am pining to drink...I mean, read such a book; I just didn't find it here. And yet I must point out, this is truly wonderfully, beautifully written. Friend is a really, really good writer, and this is a lovely family memoir. It just wasn't what I wanted it to be, which really isn't the book's fault. I was hoping for more of a cultural and historical examination of Wasp culture, through the prism of this author's family. Friend has written a memoir of his esteemed, fucked-up, mildly interesting family, who happen to be Wasps. I don't tend to like memoirs in the bitter, dysfunctional, woe-is-me-my-parents-screwed-me-up vein. And this guy spent most of his $160,000 inheritence on freaking *therapy*, so there's a bit of this there. For readers who are looking for a well-written family memoir, this would probably be a good choice. For a study of Wasp-dom, not so much.

Jeannie says

It was somewhat reminiscent of my own upbringing - certain notes were very familiar; and I laughed out loud at some parts that particularly resonated.

I was bugged by his need for psychoanalysis. I suppose he didn't make the point well enough for me empathize. I felt he was petulant and foolish for wasting so much money in treatment because at no point in the book did I find his mother to be unfeeling and "not love him". Blech. There was one moment where he notices that she "seems to seek praise for her cooking or things that she did" and I thought, "well, perhaps that's because none of YOU noticed her efforts." Another section shows him in a heart-to-heart with his mother and she was sad, nearly crying that none of her adult children lived nearby and he responds, "Why do

you think that is?" Smack. Well, he failed to make the point to me, anyway. I couldn't understand why they would be settling away from her for some sort of 'reason'. That part of his book annoyed me. Having said that, I did enjoy the portrait of old money and understand that he wasn't REALLY throwing the family under the bus, and I did have a lot of laughs reading it too. I wouldn't buy this book - unless you are on vacation like I was and don't have access to a library.

Becky says

I'd like to thank Tad Friend for saving me tens of thousands of dollars on psychoanalysis. His heartbreaking, yet hopeful memoir of growing up Wasp has shed a crystalline light on so much of my own upbringing and experience. While I won't agree with Mary Karr's characterization of *Cheerful Money* as being "side-splittingly funny," I did unearth a fresh reserve of good humor to which I will turn the next time I visit my own Wasp hell.

Cheerful Money is witty, poignant and reassuring, but ultimately, it is just phenomenally good writing, hence the 5 stars.

El says

This is an incredibly difficult book to rate as it is written well (the author doesn't write for *The New Yorker* for no reason), but the subject itself was at times tedious.

Tad Friend is a self-proclaimed WASP from a long lineage of WASPs, and is at once both disturbed by and proud of it. His memoir discusses what it means to be a WASP (not to be confused with a "prep" which is detailed in one of the chapters), and the first half of the book that investigates this lifestyle is fairly interesting as it always is to see how other folks live. But once Friend began delving into his place in the family, his views on his family, his own beliefs (which don't vary that much from his family, despite what he seems to want to portray), etc. my interest waned. After a while it felt like he was that person at the office who always complains about the amount of work he/she has to do, but as soon as the boss takes away said amount of work, he/she takes it all very personally, he/she didn't really want it to go away for all of his/her bitching. Friend does that here in some ways in that he almost turns his nose up at the lifestyle of his family, and complains about the lack of love and other necessities, but then turns around and embraces those exact things.

I guess that's probably his point. We are what we know, after all.

Moving beyond that, the second half of the book felt like a vehicle for the psychoanalysis he eventually stopped participating in, which he describes in some detail. The book is his way of continuing his investigation into his own behaviors, though I'm not sure in the end he made any true headway. After all, he just wants to be loved, despite where he came from.

There were some nice shout-outs to Pittsburgh, particularly Squirrel Hill (the family compound originally was on Solway Street). It's a shame it no longer stands there; I would have liked to see it outside of the b/w photo in the insert.

What complicates the rating system for me is that it's all written *well*, which I can at least respect. His words smelled of all of the Henry James, Edith Wharton, Scott Fitzgerald high-society novels I've ever read, and Friend makes sure to acknowledge that throughout his memoir. Those authors made money on these situations because they were real, which Friend illustrates wonderfully here, whether I approve of the lifestyle or even can fully comprehend it. No family is without flaws, certainly, and Friend gave me a fine serving of food-for-thought. I just wish it hadn't been quite so woe-is-me-aren't-we-awesome.

Sara says

This book was alternately entertaining and bewildering. The author is a WASP, and the book is about how the WASPs are a dying breed. (No, this is not the same thing as when the bees died because of cell phones.)

It truly takes a WASP to believe that WASPS are a dying breed. (The author thinks the new-economy-internet-types are the new power players in the country.) Take a look around your company's board of directors and tally up how many of them are WASPS. Take a quick look at Congress and see how many are WASPs. (Speaking of WASP politicians, Friend points out something that made me laugh quite hard: Bill Clinton is a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, but he'll never be a WASP, because poor people from Arkansas can never be WASPs. George Bush, on the other hand, is a WASP through and through. That whole shtick about bein' a brush-clearin' cowboy down on the ranch was just PR to get people to see past the old money, the Yale education, and the New England background.)

The fact that Friend is delusional about WASPs fading away is tempered by the fact that he is also incredibly self-aware and self-deprecating. He knows that he sounds like a rich spoiled brat, and he's okay with it, and he points it out, and it's kind of funny. He spent his inheritance almost entirely on therapy and analysis. How perfectly WASPy is that?

Michael Rymer says

This review originally appeared on the literary website, The Second Pass:

It would be possible to make three good, small books of Cheerful Money. Not that I’m suggesting anyone chop it up with a kitchen knife, as Janet Malcolm did to The Making of Americans by Gertrude Stein. I’d just like to imagine the book, for a moment, in three bindings rather than one, with the history of Tad Friend’s family, Friend’s reading of WASP culture, and his memoir of his own life — the three stories mixed together in Cheerful Money — each standing on its own.

The best of these mini-books would concern the symbols of WASPdom. It would include Friend’s description of the “WASP fridge,” its “out-of-season grapes, seltzer, and vodka . . . both 1 and 2 percent milk, moldy cheese, expired yogurt, and separated sour cream” and, sitting atop, “Pepperidge Farm Milanos, Fig Newtons, or Saltines — some chewy or salty or otherwise challenging snack.”

WASPs love “getting dirty . . . in a game of touch football,” Friend explains, mud being their “only

sanctioned form of filth." They name their dogs after liquor — Bourbon, Asti, Cloey (for Clos du Boi), and Casey (for "case of beer") are the names of some of the dogs owned by Sally, a classmate of Friend's at boarding school. They "cream off family names as given names" (Mortimer, Courtlandt, and Whitney being examples of such "creamed" first names). And they hang onto everything they've ever owned: "etched-crystal wineglasses" and "pedestaled fruit plates" and "egg spoons of translucent horn" are some things they may expect to inherit.

These choice observations, and many more like them, if collected in a small volume, would remind some readers of the best-selling Official Preppy Handbook, though without that book's direct satire or — as Preppies can be made but WASPs are born — potential sales. (Though it was a satire, many people read the Handbook as a style manual, including Friend himself, as he confesses here.)

WASPs are "circumscribed less by skin tone and religion" than by a "cast of mind." They're born into families that harbor firmly fixed views, carried over the generations, about minor matters. Friend recalls a running dispute between his great uncle, Wilson Pierson, who descends from a line that pronounces tomato "tomayto," and his mother, Elizabeth, whose own mother was in the "staunchly Anglophile 'tomahto' camp." When she would ask Wilson for a "tomahto," Wilson would snap, "Would you like some potahtoes with that?" The WASP mind, Friend explains, is "excessively tuned to such questions as how you say tomato."

Another marker, of course, is a generations-long history of wealth. Friend's own richest relative, his great great grandfather, Big Jim Friend, left his heirs $15,000,000, the equivalent of $345,000,000 today, though most of that money was lost — much of it squandered over many years maintaining a three-house compound with eighteen servants on Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill, and some of it drained by the Depression. Friend doesn't fix on an amount of money that separates a WASP from an ordinary Anglo, but any reader will quickly grasp how very few families legitimately deserve the appellation. Friend's maternal great grandfather, Charles Pierson, was a Yale valedictorian and Manhattan corporate lawyer, and it was the Pierson family summer house, an eight-bedroom mansion on Georgica Pond in Long Island, where the "tomahto" spats unfolded. WASPs are people whose quibbles about language have an ocean view.

Friend's portraits of men such as Jim Friend and Charles Pierson, which account for more pages than either of the other two strands of the book, tell in their aggregate a story of decline. Theodore Wood Friend, Big Jim's son, was an incompetent bank president who had "skinny legs and a care-worn appearance that made him look old when he wasn't, and ancient when he was." His son (the author's grandfather), Ted Friend, talked up dive bomb stocks — Nerlip Mines, Red Rock Cola, and laughably, Hygienic Telephone — before his brokerage firm fired him. Before he was fifty, he'd "retired to playing backgammon" at the Pittsburgh club.

Tad's father, Dorie Friend, brought to his marriage, in 1960, a relative pittance: less than $50,000. That was still a lot of money, but it went fast. Friend remembers wondering why he could "see the road through the rusted floor" of the family station wagon.

WASP fortunes began to turn in 1965, three years after Friend was born. That was the year Yale's new admissions director, R. Inslee "Inky" Clark, dramatically reduced the allotment of spots for alumni offspring to 12 percent from 20; the year it first became clear that "the WASP elite running the war" in Vietnam "hadn't a clue." It was also the year Lyndon Johnson mandated affirmative action for government employees and, perhaps of most significant symbolism, "the country's most famous and exclusive clubs stopped updating their look and feel." Today, as in 1965:

If you go to these clubs for dinner on a Saturday night, you get Scotch-plaid-upholstered furniture in the vintage cherry or English tavern finish; accordion-folded napkins in water glasses and sourdough rolls on the bread plates. . . . And, for company, an elderly gent in the corner in a striped three-piece suit.

The gradual erosion of the fortunes of the Friend family, then, was the manifestation of a broader trend. The Friends are not the only WASP family whose stories of fortunes triumphantly amassed — which, in the case of Big Jim, involved evicting striking Pressed Steel Car Company workers from their homes and a clash between those workers and his "Coal and Iron Police" that killed 12 people — are all but eclipsed by stories of gradually (then suddenly) losing them.

There are dozens of these family portraits, more than any reader will want to manage. Because the mini-biographies don't follow a chronological order, and accounts of the different branches of Friend's family are interweaved, the names and generations begin to blur. And few of the profiles are long enough to probe deeper mysteries of character.

But Friend's expert descriptions make up for the jumble, particularly those of relatives who have spent their lives chafing against expectations. His cousin Norah became pregnant at age 19 while a second-year student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. She put the baby up for adoption and later had two abortions. In Santa Fe, she used her father's money to build "the Flintstone House," an "ordinary bungalow" that she "wrapped in ten thousand pounds of polyurethane foam." At age 52, she resettled on Pierson family territory, living year-round in an artist's studio across from the family's Long Island summer house, the upkeep of which she oversaw. Friend recalls her rolling "her own blunts on the porch, pot smoke wreathing her gray topknot." Norah's sister changed her name — first calling herself "Reverend Trish," then Molly Morgan Miller — and never returned to the fold.

As for the impression Tad Friend provides of Theodore Porter Friend — or, himself — it includes an affecting remembrance of his freshman advisor at Harvard, an orotund epicure who shepherded him into the Lampoon; too much about his ten-year on-again, off-again affair with an Italian heiress; and nothing at all about his intellectual formation — not a single recollection of an ecstatic experience with a book, and not one anecdote related to his long tenure at The New Yorker, where he is a staff writer.

Friend might make the case that his undergraduate education and his job aren't part of this particular story, but I caught myself using his own cultural theories as a lens for understanding the book's omissions, its flaws. "Visible striving or seriousness of purpose is unWASP because it suggests that you aren't yet at — haven't always been at — the top," he writes. WASPs are, he reports, masters of "the trick of effortlessness . . . the loosely knotted tie and the feet on the sill." So, Harvard and The New Yorker: yes, they happened, but what's the big deal?

WASPs are "circumspect," according to Friend, but he isn't so circumspect as to keep from exposing himself and his family in this memoir, or of writing about his mother, an emotionally distant woman who imposed upon her children afternoon naps until they were "twelve, thirteen, amazingly old" to keep her house "free of traffic." She is the dominant — but also most elusive — figure in this story, and her death in 2003 inspired Friend to write the book.

Friend remembers "building the internal WASP rheostat, the dimmer switch on desires" as a child; and of "long[ing:]" as an adult for his psychoanalyst to "reach inside" and "rip" it out, which he compares to the moment in the Chronicles of Narnia in which Aslan "gouges off" Eustace's "scaly exoskeleton." One of the pleasures of this book is watching Friend struggle to do this — and come pretty close to succeeding.

Bob Simon says

A very funny, and engrossing field guide to Eastern WASP culture. It explains a lot of what I saw and failed to understand in several decades of marriage within that world...but certainly not born to it. It is neurotic, historical, idiosyncratic, and revealing. Treated as a Lonely Planet guide, used after you have visited the country, it is also useful...if, perhaps, slightly out of date.

Friend's tone feels like those late night bullshit sessions in college...the ones where you get down to it, but with humor and exhausted revelation. I liked it a lot. I guess a good test of how funny it is was reading it in a few restaurants and coffee shops, and unexpectedly burst into laughter enough times....and with enough velocity...to draw stares from other patrons. There is insight here, and the kind of gentle wit, easy scholarship, arrogance, modesty, and absolute strangeness that is the best of the old WASP world.

I was not compelled to finish this book in one or two sittings as I usually do, but to pick it up and put it down, and pick it up again...as a series of visits with a good friend...no pun intended.

Ciara says

sad to say, i didn't really "get" this book. mary karr (an author i like quite a bit) gave it a good blurb, but i apparently failed to see what she saw. it was not "side-splittingly" hilarious, & mary karr is no WASP, so supposedly you don't have to be one to understand the humor. maybe you have to live in new york? not sure.

this is basically just a family memoir. i can only assume it got published because friend writes for "the new yorker" & has plenty of publishing contacts, because i can't begin to imagine that any editor actually found the story interesting. it was nearly impossible to keep all the players straight (& even the provided family tree flummoxed me, with everyone getting divorced & marrying two & three times, with step-children aplenty--not that i'm judging). everyone is named after everyone else, & then has some cutesy nickname to boot. baffling. & i guess i also just wasn't interested enough to make the effort.

maybe someone could explain to me the point of this book? because i was expecting some kind of parable on WASp culture told through the prism of one multi-generation family, & i got the sense that that's exactly what friend was going for, & it really didn't come off at all.

Nette says

I'd describe this book as "engrossing" -- every time I'd pick it up I'd have to force myself to stop. (However, ignore the blurbs on the back about it being "side-splittingly funny", because unless you find repression and resentment and detailed explanations of everyone's inheritances hilarious, it's not.) But it's very enjoyable, and the author likes to throw around his fancy vocab words, so it was like getting a free SAT review. Mumchance! Adumbrate! Asseverate!

George says

PUNCTILIOUS POOP.

It was the clever title that roped me into reading this book. "…Last Days of Wasp Splendor," had me hoping. Unfortunately, the title turned out to be the best part of this confusing and rather dull story.

Despite his enviable, world-class vocabulary and his obvious facility with words, Tad Friend's pretentious memoir: 'Cheerful Money: Me, My Family and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor' falls short of being entertaining or interesting. Only Chapter Four: Sand, and its stories about, Norah, the oldest daughter of his mother's uncle (all the relationships in this memoir were this confusing, or more so), coaxed me out of a second star. This memoir sailed right over my head.

Recommendation: Not likely.

A couple of interesting quotes:

"Fundamentalism is not merely a wave in religion worldwide: it is a tide." –pg 31

"I felt guilty and spooked, brushed by the monkey's paw." –pg 215 (Even Google couldn't help explain this interesting phrase: "brushed by the monkey's paw." Has anyone ever heard it before?)

"In 1648, the colony [Massachusetts:] established the death penalty for children over age sixteen who disobeyed their parents." –pg 87 (Ya gotta love those folks in Salem. Maybe we can get this one passed as a constitutional amendment.)

[Nook eRead #15:] (Adobe Digital Edition (ePUB), 285 pages. On 21-day loan from the Los Angeles County Public Library)

Meg says

Life's too short to read bad books... I really was excited to read this, but it was just a bunch of seemingly disconnected ramblings. I thought the topic could have been very interesting, but it just seemed like sort of self-important nonsensical stream of conscious.

Mandy says

Some great observations and anecdotes, and I kept on sending excerpts of passages to friends. But I think the NY Times review is right that at times the book feels a bit too crowded, making it difficult to keep track of all of the family members he describes, and that sometimes the wasp theme can be oppressive and get in the way of natural storytelling flow. Some of my favorite parts were his descriptions of the women in his life, particularly his mother--a Smith grad always contending with Sylvia Plath for poetry prizes--and the women that helped him breakthrough emotionally (both girlfriends and, of course, a therapist). While he wasn't as

pithy, I think George Howe Colt's BIg House probably gives better insights into wasps and the Brahmin decline.

Jennifer says

It's interesting that so many of the goodreads reviews about Cheerful Money are ambivalent. I liked so much of this book, and then I thought "Big whoop" about a lot of it. A lot of what Friend characterizes as "Wasp" is just a sad family dynamic. But also clearly a loving family as well. In short, families that are families. I read it because I have a big girlcrush on Amanda Hesser, the NY Times food writer and founder of Food 52 web community, and Tad Friend's wife. I'm glad that I did read it because it explained to me exactly why I hated going to college in Massachusetts so much. When I got to Smith I just couldn't understand the culture and why traditions there mattered to people and how they knew what to do. Reading this book made me understand and then ask myself, "Who cares?"

It's beautifully written, and the structure of the narrative is fluid. Friend's own story is interwoven, not always chronologically, with his family's and the chapters are grouped around a name or phrase that takes on resonance as the chapter progresses. I loved the meandering pace, and there is a great payback at the end of the book when he marries Amanda H. I'm glad he wrote the book, I'm glad that I don't have anything to do with his world, and I am so thankful to have been raised in California.

Carolyn says

A very entertaining book about the "old" money class and how they are or are not, just like the rest of us. The author's families are from "old" money and with that comes a certain presitige along with certain expectations. My view is that they are rapidly becoming a dying breed. The old money has been eaten up by multiple generations and anything that is left has drastically shrunk in value by the 21st century. I, personally, am sorry to see them go. They have been replaced by the nouveau riche, and the wannabees whose view of money and responsibility are diametriacally opposed to their predecessors. The old money people spent their money on education, land, animals, conservation. They have a very healthy respect for money and did not use it to flaunt it on ostentatious showiness. The old monied people are also known as the "cave dwellers" for their lack of presence at society events and therefore not names to be found and recognized in the society pages. Tad Friend, the author, takes us inside their family dynamic and honestly, except for the money available for their education, they are like every healthy, loving family we all have or aspire to have. They enjoy a sweetness and humor that makes reading this book and spending some time with them a lot of fun. I highly recommend it!
