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# The Last Castle: The Epic Story Of Love, Loss, And American Royalty In The Nation's Largest Home



## Synopsis

From the author of the New York Times bestseller *The Girls of Atomic City* comes the fascinating true story behind the magnificent Gilded Age mansion Biltmore – the largest, grandest residence ever built in the United States. 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 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. *The Last Castle* is the unique American story of how the largest house in America flourished, faltered, and ultimately endured to this day.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 400 pages

Publisher: Touchstone; Not for Online ed. edition (September 26, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1476794049

ISBN-13: 978-1476794044

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

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Best Sellers Rank: #28,065 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #12 in [Books > Arts &](#)

[Photography > Architecture > Buildings > Residential](#) #72 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

“The Last Castle is a soaring and gorgeous American story that gripped me from the very first page. With a historian’s keen insight and a poet’s gift for language, Denise Kiernan depicts life at Biltmore with such skill, I felt like I was there through it all: weddings, divorces, elaborate (and slightly bizarre) balls, financial glory, financial ruin, murder, suicide, natural disasters, betrayals, love, loss, despair, and triumph. The story of George and Edith Vanderbilt’s remarkable lives will stay with me for a long time to come.” (Karen Abbott, New York Times bestselling author of *Liar, Temptress, Soldier, Spy*)

“If you inherited billions, how would you spend it? Don’t bother building America’s largest and most lavish home. It’s already been done in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, where more than a million visitors a year stroll the grounds of Biltmore Estate. Yet only in the pages of Denise Kiernan’s *The Last Castle* will they come to know George Vanderbilt, the bookish heir who began Biltmore in his 20s, and his determined widow, Edith, who kept it alive as a working estate and a time capsule of the Gilded Age. In the pages of *The Last Castle*, Kiernan serves up a true tale of American excess, generosity, and perseverance.” (Bill Dedman, New York Times bestselling author of *Empty Mansions: The Mysterious Life of Huguette Clark and the Spending of a Great American Fortune*)

“This is as much a story about the creation of Biltmore House as it is a window into what it was like to be an American at the turn of the 20th century. Kiernan makes Edith and George Vanderbilt, among the wealthiest Americans at the time, feel like living, breathing human beings navigating life’s obstacles in this magnificent book. And she tells the story of how one fiercely devoted woman was able to save the home her husband loved.” (Kate Andersen Brower, author *FIRST WOMEN: The Grace & Power of America’s Modern First Ladies* and *THE RESIDENCE: Inside the Private World of the White House*)

“The rich have secrets. In her well-researched and captivating book, Denise Kiernan tells the fascinating story of how a phenomenally wealthy Vanderbilt scion transformed a rural North Carolina town by building the ultimate rich man’s folly and reveals the eccentricities, heartaches, and even money problems of these Social Register denizens and their friends and employees.” (Meryl Gordon, author of *Bunny Mellon: The Life of an American Style Legend*)

“This is a timely and timeless American story of wealth and the responsibility and opportunity it carries. In Kiernan’s hands, this mashup of *Downton Abbey*-like extravagance set amid the rugged mountain simplicity of Appalachia reads like a Southern fairy tale • Brothers Grimm meets *Gone with the Wind*. A

passionately researched family saga of death and divorce, suicide and sickness, fortunes gained and lost, spanning two world wars and set at the crux of the Gilded Age yielding to the modern era, The Last Castle is ultimately a story of fortitude and survival. A stunning and important achievement." (Neal Thompson, author of A Curious Man: The Strange and Brilliant Life of Robert "Believe It Or Not!" Ripley)"The many diverting detours Kiernan takes make the book enticing for even those who will never set foot on Biltmore grounds." (Booklist)

Denise Kiernan's previous book, The Girls of Atomic City, is a New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and NPR bestseller, and was named one of its Top 100 Best Books of 2013. Kiernan has been published in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Village Voice, Ms. Magazine, Reader's Digest, Discover, and many more publications. She has also worked in television, serving as head writer for ABC's Who Wants to Be a Millionaire during its Emmy award-winning first season and producing for media outlets such as ESPN and MSNBC. She has been a featured guest on NPR's Weekend Edition, PBS NewsHour, MSNBC's Morning Joe, and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

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