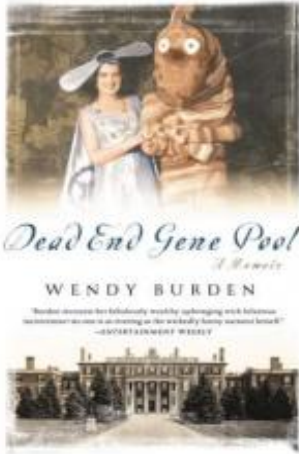


Dead End Gene Pool: A Memoir

by Wendy Burden



About the Book

The great-great-great-great granddaughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt takes a look at the decline of her wealthy blue-blooded family in this irreverent and wickedly funny memoir

For generations the Burdens were one of the wealthiest families in New York, thanks to the inherited fortune of Cornelius "The Commodore" Vanderbilt. By 1955, the year of Wendy's birth, the Burdens had become a clan of overfunded, quirky and brainy, steadfastly chauvinistic, and ultimately doomed blue bloods on the verge of financial and moral decline-and were rarely seen not holding a drink.

When her father commits suicide when Wendy is six, she and her brother are told nothing about it and are shuffled off to school as if it were any other day. Subsequently, Wendy becomes obsessed with the macabre, modeling herself after Wednesday Addams of the Addams family, and decides she wants to be a mortician when she grows up. Just days after the funeral, her mother jets off to southern climes in search of the perfect tan, and for the next three years, Wendy and her two brothers are raised mostly by a chain-smoking Scottish nanny and the long suffering household staff at their grandparent's Fifth Avenue apartment. If you think Eloise wreaked havoc at The Plaza you should see what Wendy and her brothers do in "Burdenland" --- a world where her grandfather is the president of the Museum of Modern Art; the walls are decorated with originals of Klee, Kline, Mondrian, and Miro; and Rockefellers are regular dinner guests.

The spoiled life of the uber-rich that they live with their grandparents is in dark contrast to the life they live with their mother, a brilliant Radcliffe grad and Daughter of the American Revolution, who deals with having two men's suicides on her conscience by becoming skinnier, tanner, blonder, and more steeped in bitter alcoholism with every passing year.

We watch Wendy's family unravel as she travels between Fifth Avenue, Virginia horse country, Mount Desert Island in Maine, the Jupiter Island Club, London, and boarding school, coming through all of it surprisingly intact. Rife with humor, heartbreak, family intrigue, and booze, **Dead End Gene Pool** offers a glimpse into the eccentric excess of old

money and gives truth to the old maxim: The rich are different.

Discussion Guide

1. Wendy exhibits a dark sense of humor. How do you think this affected her perception of the events of her childhood?
2. What do you think saved Wendy from the pitfalls that plagued her brothers and uncles?
3. Were either Wendy's grandparents or her own mother adequate child custodians? Do you think the courts would have questioned their custody if the family hadn't had so much money?
4. How could Wendy and Will's mother and grandparents better handled explaining the suicide of their father to them?
5. Wendy writes, "rich people behaving badly are far more interesting than the not so rich behaving badly" (p. 5). Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
6. If the Horatio-Algeresque rise of Cornelius Vanderbilt embodies the fulfillment of the American dream, why is it so pleasurable to read about his heirs' descent into decadence and failure?
7. There are a lot of stories about lottery winners and inheritors of great wealth either burning through their money, or winding up really unhappy. Why do you think unearned money is so often a curse?
8. How, if at all, does the wealth of Wendy's grandparents affect your reading of their final years?
9. If you could ask Wendy one question left unanswered by her memoir, what would it be?
10. *Dead End Gene Pool* is both touching and funny. Would Wendy's narrative have been as compassionate if she'd written it in her 20s or 30s?
11. Why does Wendy choose to end the book with the information she discovered about Charles Thomas, her mother's former lover?
12. F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said, "The rich are different from you and I." And Ernest Hemingway's famously replied, "Yes, they have more money." Whose statement do you find yourself in agreement with after reading **Dead End Gene Pool**?

Author Bio

Wendy Burden is a confirmed New Yorker who, to her constant surprise, lives in Portland, Oregon. She is the great-great-great-great granddaughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt, which qualifies her to comment freely on the downward spiral of blue blood families. She has worked as an illustrator, a zookeeper, and a taxidermist; and as an art director for a pornographic magazine from which she was fired for being too tasteful. She was also the owner and chef of a small French restaurant, Chez Wendy. She has yet to attend mortuary school, but is planning on it.

Critical Praise

"Charles Addams meets Carrie Bradshaw in this honest, sardonic, and touching memoir. Burden's tale makes for riveting and often hilarious reading."

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