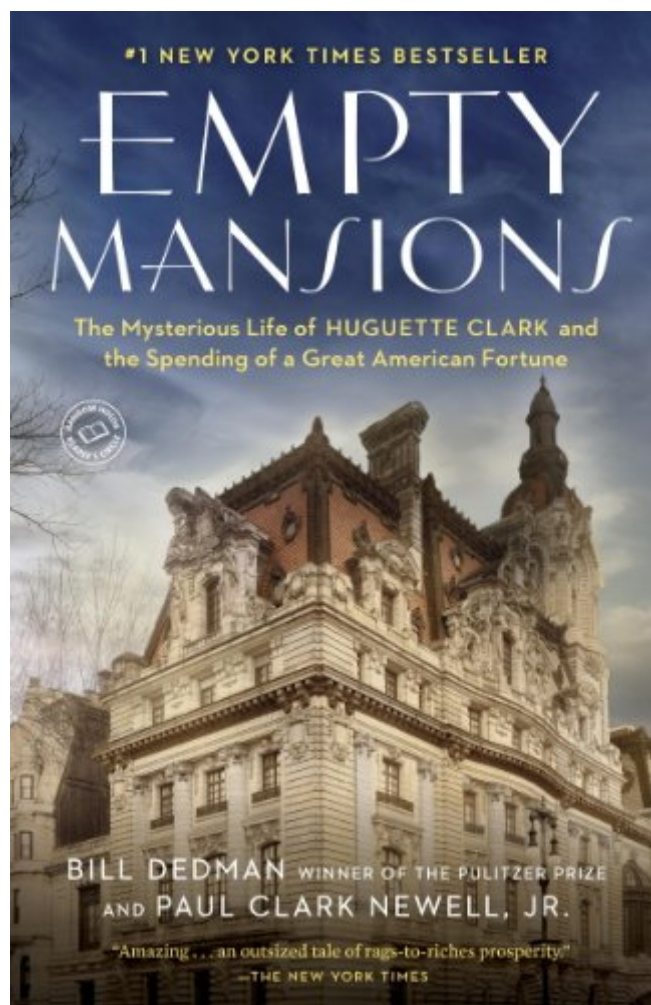


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# Empty Mansions: The Mysterious Life Of Huguette Clark And The Spending Of A Great American Fortune



## Synopsis

When Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Bill Dedman noticed in 2009 a grand home for sale, unoccupied for nearly sixty years, he stumbled through a surprising portal into American history. *Empty Mansions* is a rich mystery of wealth and loss, connecting the Gilded Age opulence of the nineteenth century with a twenty-first-century battle over a \$300 million inheritance. At its heart is a reclusive heiress named Huguette Clark, a woman so secretive that, at the time of her death at age 104, no new photograph of her had been seen in decades. Though she owned palatial homes in California, New York, and Connecticut, why had she lived for twenty years in a simple hospital room, despite being in excellent health? Why were her valuables being sold off? Was she in control of her fortune, or controlled by those managing her money? Dedman has collaborated with Huguette Clark's cousin, Paul Clark Newell, Jr., one of the few relatives to have frequent conversations with her. Dedman and Newell tell a fairy tale in reverse: the bright, talented daughter, born into a family of extreme wealth and privilege, who secrets herself away from the outside world. Huguette was the daughter of self-made copper industrialist W. A. Clark, nearly as rich as Rockefeller in his day, a controversial senator, railroad builder, and founder of Las Vegas. She grew up in the largest house in New York City, a remarkable dwelling with 121 rooms for a family of four. She owned paintings by Degas and Renoir, a world-renowned Stradivarius violin, a vast collection of antique dolls. But wanting more than treasures, she devoted her wealth to buying gifts for friends and strangers alike, to quietly pursuing her own work as an artist, and to guarding the privacy she valued above all else. The Clark family story spans nearly all of American history in three generations, from a log cabin in Pennsylvania to mining camps in the Montana gold rush, from backdoor politics in Washington to a distress call from an elegant Fifth Avenue apartment. The same Huguette who was touched by the terror attacks of 9/11 held a ticket nine decades earlier for a first-class stateroom on the second voyage of the Titanic. *Empty Mansions* reveals a complex portrait of the mysterious Huguette and her intimate circle. We meet her extravagant father, her publicity-shy mother, her star-crossed sister, her French boyfriend, her nurse who received more than \$30 million in gifts, and the relatives fighting to inherit Huguette's copper fortune. Richly illustrated with more than seventy photographs, *Empty Mansions* is an enthralling story of an eccentric of the highest order, a last jewel of the Gilded Age who lived life on her own terms. Advance praise for *Empty Mansions* "Empty Mansions is a dazzlement and a wonder. Bill Dedman and Paul Newell unravel a great character, Huguette Clark, a shy soul akin to Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* if Boo's father had been as rich as Rockefeller. This is an enchanting journey into the mysteries of the mind, a true-to-life exploration of strangeness and

delight.â•â "Pat Conroy, author of *The Death of Santini: The Story of a Father and His Son*  
âœEmpty Mansions is at once an engrossing portrait of a forgotten American heiress and a  
fascinating meditation on the crosswinds of extreme wealth. Hugely entertaining and well  
researched, Empty Mansions is a fabulous read.â•â "Amanda Foreman, author of *A World on  
Fire*From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

File Size: 13772 KB

Print Length: 496 pages

Publisher: Ballantine Books (September 10, 2013)

Publication Date: September 10, 2013

Sold by:Â Random House LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00CK8CJOU

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #18 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #1 inÂ Books >  
Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > Women #1 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs >  
Leaders & Notable People > Rich & Famous #1 inÂ Books > Humor & Entertainment

## Customer Reviews

EMPTY MANSIONS will surely climb the best-seller list. The book about Huguette Clark, heir to an enormous fortune and mistress of several large, poetically empty properties, is easy to fall into and harder to remove oneself from. Although not an especially interesting person, Huguette is fascinating on the written page mostly for what she didn't do in life, rather than what she did. Usually biographies that hold readers captive are about creative, adventurous, and avant-garde individuals doing unusual activities and living fascinating lives. Huguette doesn't fall into those categories. Instead, she is a shy, retiring individual who withdrew from the world upon the death of her mother with whom she had a close relationship. EMPTY MANSIONS is several stories in one. The first is that of Huguette's father, the ambitious W.A. Clark, who took himself on a classic American adventure from nothing to extreme wealth. His story is also the story of the American West, of the

mining industry, and railroads. Once comfortable financially, Clark displayed his wealth in rather ostentatious manners such as the building of the Clark mansion in New York City, an intriguing but rather short-lived folly. The second story within the book is really the story of Huguette's mother, Anna. As W.A. Clark's second wife, she bore him two children, but never had the status or respect in society that she may have desired. Anna seemingly lived for her daughters and when the elder one, Andree, died, she and Huguette became inseparable. During this period, however, the two did make use of their wealth through traveling, collecting art, and buying and furnishing houses.

Reclusive millionaire Huguette Clark was a member of the wealthy Clark family copper mining dynasty, born amid mysterious circumstances in 1906 and dying in equally mysterious circumstances in 2011. A few years before her death, she attracted national media attention when it was discovered that she had left huge, luxurious mansions unoccupied for decades, and was secretly living in a spartan hospital room, despite large cash reserves and excellent health. This book is a psychological detective story that will interest fans of early 20th century American and European art, high society and politics. Other themes include the destructive role of inheritances in wealthy family members' lives, and the difficulty of determining what constitutes mental illness and elder abuse. Was Huguette Clark simply an eccentric who freely chose to isolate herself from the outside world to devote herself to art and a small circle of friends? Or was she an emotionally disturbed senior citizen hopelessly warped by a lifetime of privilege and subtly abused by her caretakers? Or both? This compelling, well-written story tries to present the evidence in a balanced manner, leaving this reader with unanswered questions. At her birth, as the child of elderly Senator William Clark's late in life May-December second marriage, there are indications that her youthful mother was still his mistress, and that the couple actually never married. At Huguette's death at the age of 104, her relatives were embroiled in a legal battle with her lawyer, accountant, private nurse and long-term care hospital, all of whom apparently violated professional ethics codes by taking enormous sums of money from the increasingly frail woman during the last two decades of her life.

At 400+ pages, *Empty Mansions* is a rather long book, so I thought I would skim through the first half, which chronicles the life of W.A. Clark, a Gilded Age millionaire who shrewdly invested in copper mines out west. He is the father of the main focus of the book -- his daughter, Huguette Clark, who lived to be 104 years old but was not seen in public for the last 70 or so years of her life. That's not a typo. Huguette Clark was an eccentric heiress whose concerns about privacy were obsessive. She is the female version of Howard Hughes. Another way to think of her is as a real life derivative

of Miss Havisham, although Ms. Clark was not left at the altar, nor did she seem at all distraught over remaining single following a very brief marriage whose end she initiated. So, as mentioned earlier, I thought I would just skim the first part of the book, since it takes place at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries and is more about Hugette's father than it is about her. However, the first few pages were so interesting that I just kept reading until I had finished every bit, including the notes and bib. The book is exceptionally well researched and thus presents an absorbing picture of America's social, economic and political landscape during the Gilded Age and on through the 20th century and the first several years of the 21st. I came to like Hugette Clark, who was strangely childlike while also being quite astute about art, style, family loyalty and friendship. In today's dollars, her father's fortune was in the billions and as the only surviving child of his second, May-December marriage, Hugette inherited it all. Born in Paris in 1906, Ms. Clark spoke French fluently and considered herself as much French as American, perhaps more so.

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