

The New York Times

Tales of High Society Getting Downright Nasty

'Mrs. Astor Regrets: The Hidden Betrayals of a Family Beyond Reproach' by Meryl Gordon

Reviewed by Janet Maslin
December 8, 2008

July 24, 2006, is a red-letter Monday in the annals of high-society scandal. What joy there was in tabloid Mudville when a reporter for The Daily News in New York learned that legal papers meant to be private had become public, thanks to a judge's reluctance to seal those papers the previous Friday afternoon. On that fateful Monday the press would discover that Philip Marshall, a grandson of the society doyenne Brooke Astor, had filed an application to usurp guardianship of his 104-year-old grandmother from Anthony D. Marshall, Philip's father and Mrs. Astor's son.

By November 2007 the complaint against Anthony Marshall had reached criminal proportions. And at 83, Mrs. Astor's only child found himself handcuffed, fingerprinted (though "modern fingerprinting machines are not calibrated for aging digits, which leave indistinct markings") and facing an 18-count indictment regarding alleged mismanagement of his mother's assets. This is Meryl Gordon's starting point for "Mrs. Astor Regrets," her book-length sojourn inside the can of worms that Philip Marshall opened.

Ms. Gordon walks her readers through a schadenfreude-filled wonderland, marveling at the miseries and indignities that this small, rich, nonnuclear family was able to create. Dispensing with the genteel reverence of Frances Kiernan's 2007 book "The Last Mrs. Astor," Ms. Gordon sets her sights squarely on the family feud. That's all right: this dispute is messy enough to fill a whole book on its own. And each of its principal figures has a complicated story.

"Mrs. Astor Regrets" would have been helped by greater resolution, since its drama is by no means over; the senior Mr. Marshall's legal difficulties remain unresolved. But as this book alarmingly illustrates in its account of an octogenarian heir-in-waiting and a mother who lived to be 105, it's wiser to live in the present than to count on what the future is supposed to bring.

"Sometimes people start screaming at me," Ms. Gordon was told by a reporter for The Daily News who wound up telling Anthony Marshall that his legal secrets had been thrust into the public spotlight. Mr. Marshall didn't scream; "he was well brought up." But he was strangely brought up too. He had a father, J. Dryden Kuser, of whom the young Brooke was decidedly not fond. About their son's conception and birth, she wrote in a memoir, "Having not participated very willingly in this future event, I was perturbed."

When the Kusers divorced, Brooke brought Anthony to Manhattan from New Jersey, "uprooting her 6-year-old son from his pony and country life." After she married Charles Marshall, known as Buddie, her son adopted the Marshall name. The boy was sued by his father, who argued that Anthony had forfeited any claim to a Kuser trust fund.

After Brooke then married the proprietary Vincent Astor, Anthony became persona non grata and saw little of his mother. That Astor himself had a wretched childhood (he remembered being locked in a cedar closet by his mother and having to be rescued by a butler) only further heightens the aura of well-heeled dysfunction in which Ms. Gordon's story unfolds.

Mrs. Astor sometimes took pride in her son, to the point of praising his service as the United States ambassador to Madagascar. ("Have you ever heard of a bad ambassador to Madagascar?" she was asked by Louis Auchincloss, easily the sharpest and wittiest of Ms. Gordon's interviewees.) And she allowed him to help manage her resources as she grew older. What she did not do was make him financially independent, at least not enough so to live in the manner to which he felt entitled.

Other members of the Astor household, from servants to the saintly (by Ms. Gordon's account) Buddhist grandson, Philip, began to notice gaps and irregularities. Where was the beloved Child Hassam painting that Mrs. Astor had planned to donate to the Metropolitan Museum of Art? (Sold by her son, who took a sizeable commission.) Where were the baubles of a woman who, according to Mr. Auchincloss, "never went out at night with less than a million dollars around her neck"?

According to this book, "Even though Mrs. Astor was not going out much anymore, her jewelry was." It was turning up on the elder Mr. Marshall's wife, Charlene, who had scandalized Northeast Harbor, Me., by leaving her clergyman husband for Mr. Marshall. Charlene went on to scandalize New York by hiring a belly dancer for Mr. Marshall's birthday party at the Knickerbocker Club.

And so, "from Shanghai to Sydney to the banks of the Seine, the Astor docudrama was destined to be a global event," Ms. Gordon writes, with the heavy-breathing hyperbole that occasionally recalls her book's origins as a gossipy New York magazine piece. (Really, Ms. Gordon is too substantive a writer to be mentioning movie actresses she has profiled in her author's biography here.)

And however globally the Astor-Marshall meltdown may have been discussed, there are limits to the interest it holds. The horrors that galvanized Astor friends like David Rockefeller and Annette de la Renta to help the younger Mr. Marshall intervene on his grandmother's behalf include the substitution of Korean market flowers for costlier, more aesthetically pleasing arrangements. Ghoulish diaries kept by Mrs. Astor's nurses also record the patient's being made to eat leftovers and the neglect of Boysie and Girlsie, the Astor dogs with the cloyingly adorable names.

Although "Mrs. Astor Regrets" has its share of insightful observations, it's got the occasional case of foot-in-mouth as well. From Vartan Gregorian: "She could talk about books, about people, about issues, about nature, about gardens, about African-Americans." Many of those interviewed seem tone-deaf to their own gushing excesses and overwhelmed by displays of largess. About Ms. De la Renta's literally gilded childhood: "Dinner guests still recall the stacks of gold Krugerrands used as table décor and given away as party favors." But in the end what leaps most powerfully out of this book is the story of a grande dame's mortifying decline and the terrifying delusions she faced in her last days. The Marshall family meltdown was one nightmare she was lucky enough to miss.