

Discussion Questions for American Duchess: A Novel of Consuelo Vanderbilt by Karen Harper

1. Talk about the historical period in which the story is set. How well do you think the author conveys the era? Did she remain true to the events, social structures and political events of the time period?
2. What was unique about the setting of the book, and how did it enhance or take away from specific themes in the book? What do you think the author was trying to across to the reader?
3. How does Consuelo's American democratic background vs. the duke's aristocratic one merge or clash in the story? Should she have handled things differently? Why did the duke hate America?
4. Consuelo's handling of her mother over the years says a lot about both women. Should Consuelo just have cut her mother off after she was forced to marry the duke? Is Alva strictly a villain? Does she redeem her earlier conduct? Why do you think she acted so dictatorially?
5. Are there other major conflicts in the story? How do the people change, grown or evolve through the course of the book? What events triggered those changes?
6. What does Mrs. Prattley mean to Consuelo? Is she something beyond mere charity? Why does Consuelo continue to think of the old lady over the years?
7. How much do early relationships affect us in adulthood? How did her governess, Miss Harper, have an impact on Consuelo? What about the ill child she took presents to in her pony cart child at Idle Hour?
8. So many of us tend to see war that is distant from us in time or place in abstract generalities. Today's media close-up-and- personal coverage makes the human impact of war more real. How does Consuelo's contact with refugees make the impact of war hit home for her?
9. Jacques Balsan's life greatly paralleled the history of early flight from hot-air balloons to war planes with bombs. Since Americans tend to focus on the Wright brothers, I was not aware that France was also key in the race toward modern flight. Did any other historical details surprise you in this novel? For example, I was amazed how many people of this era were divorced. (*author's question*)
10. When reading historical fiction, is it difficult to keep our own, modern-day experiences from influencing our perception of the story? Can we realistically imagine what life was like for Consuelo with her story and the period in which she lived?
11. Compare this book to other works of historical fiction that you have read. Is it similar to some of them? Did you like this book more or less than other books you've read? Would you recommend it to other friends?