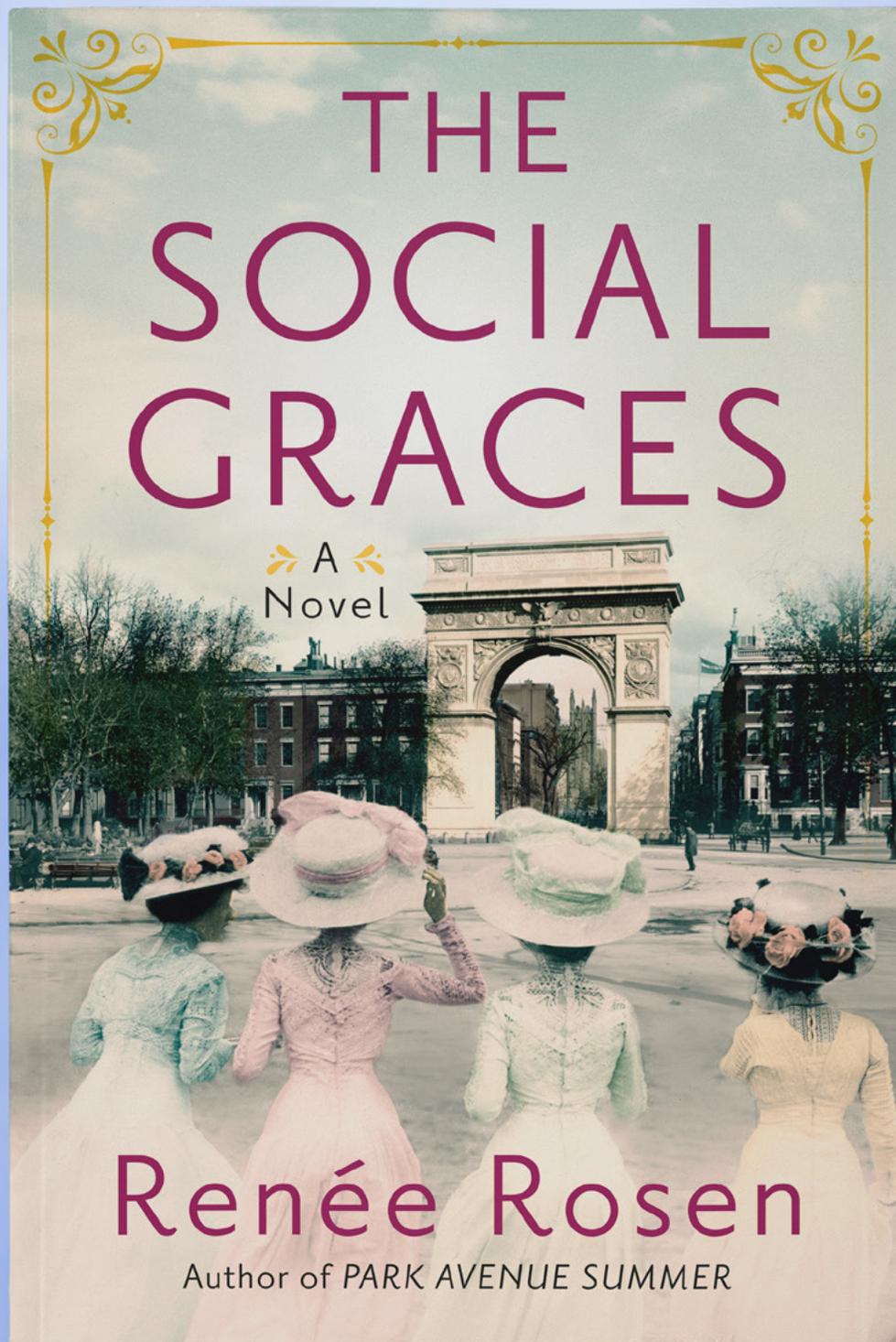


# Book Club Kit



## THE SOCIAL GRACES

A  
Novel

Renée Rosen

Author of *PARK AVENUE SUMMER*



## DEAR BOOK CLUB FRIENDS,

Thank you so much for selecting *The Social Graces* for your book club discussion. I'd like to personally welcome you to the opulence and splendor of the Gilded Age, which in my opinion is one of the most fascinating chapters in America's history.

This is actually the second time I've written in this time period. The first was in my 2014 novel, *What the Lady Wants*, which focused on the retail tycoon Marshall Field during Chicago's Gilded Age. Now, in *The Social Graces*, we turn our attention to New York City and the larger-than-life women who ran society.

The Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth century and the ending of the Civil War created immense fortunes for individuals and families who were either rooted in or had relocated to New York City. Within this immense pool of wealth there were two distinct groups: the original settlers of New York, known as the Knickerbockers or colloquially the old money, and the emerging merchants and industrialists known as the nouveau riche or the new money. Never shall the twain meet! At least that was the cry of the Knickerbockers who did everything in their power to keep the nouveau riche out of high society.

Caroline Astor, commonly referred to as *The Mrs. Astor*, was the reigning queen of the Knickerbockers and therefore of New York society. Her rival, Alva Vanderbilt, represented the nouveau riche. *The Social Graces* is their story and their battle for control of society. Based on true events, it's a rich story (pun intended) filled with gossip, scandal and ladies behaving badly. I think your group will have a lot of fun with this novel and to help you make the most of your book club discussion, my publishing team and I have prepared this special kit that we hope you'll find useful.

While planning your gathering, please keep in mind that I love meeting with book clubs and am available to join your discussion either virtually or, if possible, in person. You can arrange a visit (free online and for a nominal fee in person) through Novel Network ([NovelNetwork.com](http://NovelNetwork.com)), which also gives you access to hundreds of other authors and is a great resource for book clubs.

Thank you again for selecting *The Social Graces* and happy reading to you.

*Renée*

# Discussion Questions

1.

The Gilded Age was definitely a time of the haves and have-nots. While that era funded some of America's greatest cultural and artistic institutions, it also gave rise to the greatest wealth disparity the country had ever known. In some ways this pattern has been repeated in modern times with the rise of the technology boom. Can we learn anything from the past to help us close the current wealth gap?

2.

Mothers in the Gilded Age kept a very tight hold on their daughters' personal lives. How did you relate to the mother/daughter relationships in the novel? Do you think that in today's world daughters are more outspoken with their mothers?

3.

Prior to her affair with Willie K. Vanderbilt, Consuelo Yznaga's, the Duchess of Manchester, had been Alva's best friend. In the book, Alva felt her friend's betrayal was worse than her husband's. What do you think about that? Should Alva have forgiven her friend? What about her husband?

4.

As we know, women in the 1800s became immersed in society and took their positions very seriously because they had few opportunities for fulfillment outside the home. Do you think this was a superficial endeavor or an act of survival? Had you lived in the Gilded Age do you think you would have been involved in society? And if so, what role would you have played?

5.

Alva initially did not invite Carrie Astor to her masquerade ball, which was the event of the season. This forced Caroline to welcome the Vanderbilts into society. As a parent, do you think Caroline did the right thing for her daughter or should Caroline have stood her ground? What were your thoughts on the weight of this one gesture made by Mrs. Astor?

6.

If you suddenly inherited millions of dollars, how do you think it would change your life? What would you do with a windfall like the one Willie K. and Alva received? And how do you think old and new money coexist today?

7.

Arranged marriages were gradually being phased out in the mid-1800s, but parents, especially mothers, still had a big say in who their children married. What characteristics in selecting a mate were the most important in the book? Knowing that family approval is still important to many couples today,

how do you think the criteria for choosing a partner has changed in modern times?

8.

Sisterhood plays a big role in this novel. We see the bond and sometimes rivalry between siblings with Alva and her sisters as well as among the Astor girls. How did you feel about the various sibling relationships presented here?

9.

The 1800s marked the birth of the society pages and gossip columns. How do you think the press impacted the behavior of the Knickerbockers and the nouveau riche?

10.

Alva Vanderbilt went from being a social climber and wannabe architect to a suffragette. She was also among the first women in this country to successfully sue her husband for divorce. What do you think was the turning point for her that made her ambitions shift in such a drastic way?

# Gilded Age Etiquette 101

The Gilded Age was all about etiquette. According to polite society, there was a proper way to do everything, and I do mean *everything*. We couldn't possibly cover all the protocols here, but I have listed a few examples of how people were expected to conduct themselves back in the day.

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## Calling Cards, Social Calls & Correspondence

Calling cards were vital for society ladies and conveyed a myriad of messages beyond just one's name. Turning down various corners of one's calling card was a way of expressing everything from gratitude to sympathy.

The main reason a lady needed calling cards was for paying the all-important social call. Social calls were made after two in the afternoon and lasted precisely twenty minutes. If someone paid you a social call, you were expected to in turn pay them a social visit, which then required that they would revisit you. As you can see, this set up an endless loop of social calling.

In that faraway time before emails and text messages, handwritten correspondence was the way to communicate. A lady required two forms of stationery: one for use in the city, and one for use in the "country," also known as Newport. In the city, a lady only had her name engraved at the top and possibly an address. It was acceptable to include a family crest on one's country stationery but doing so on one's city stationery was considered positively gauche.



## Courtship & the Secret Language of Love

Young ladies typically made their debut at the age of sixteen, which officially placed them in the marriage marketplace. Whenever in the company of a suitor, she had to be accompanied by a chaperone. However, to keep one step ahead of the chaperones and the watchful eyes of their mothers, young ladies often used the following tricks to communicate to their beaux across the ballroom:

- Dropping her glove was a bold declaration of love.
- Twisting her kerchief with her right hand indicated that she was in love with someone else.
- If she wanted a gentleman to follow her to a secluded area, she need only hold her fan up to her face with her right hand. And God forbid if a chaperone was onto them, she would quickly sweep that fan across her forehead—code for cease all plans immediately.
- Biting the tip of a gloved finger or quickly opening and closing a fan told an admirer not to get his hopes up. The lady wasn't interested.

## Gilded Age Fashion & Style

Society ladies were all about fashion. The minimum acceptable amount to spend per gown was \$500, and not a penny less. With the help of their maids, society ladies devoted approximately an hour on their morning toilette and another hour or more for their evening toilette. Why did it take so long to get dressed? In addition to coiffing one's hair, just look at all the layers and accessories they wore:

- A chemise
- A corset
- A corset covering
- The under petticoat
- A lightweight steel-cage crinoline
- An over petticoat
- The actual gown
- Elbow gloves
- A hat
- A cloak and matching umbrella
- And of course jewelry

And speaking of jewelry, it was a necessary part of any lady's outfit; however, she had to be careful about what she chose to wear and when. Diamonds worn during the afternoon was a big no-no and unmarried girls were not permitted to wear tiaras.

Perfume was tricky, too. It was applied only to one's handkerchief, never directly to one's skin. A woman was judged by the type and amount of fragrance she wore. Musk was quite popular among the Smart Set back then.

# Oh, the Snobby Things They Said!

The best and worst from Mrs. Astor,  
Alva Vanderbilt, Ward McAllister & Mamie Fish



*Mrs. Caroline Schermerhorn Astor*

“I do not care for railroad money. I believe one’s wealth should be inherited rather than earned.”

“I have heard that our young women smoke and drink and do other terrible things...and I am quite sure there is not one in my circle who is a cigarette fiend or who drinks to excess.”

“I am not vain enough to think New York will not be able to get on along very well without me. Many women will rise up to take my place. But I hope my influence will be felt in one thing, and that is in the discouraging the undignified methods employed by certain New York women to attract a following. They have given entertainments that belong under a circus tent.”

*Mrs. Alva Vanderbilt*

“Pray to God. She will help you.”

“I know of no profession, art or trade that women are working in today as taxing as being a leader of society.”





### *Mr. Ward McAllister*

“The man who gives salmon during the winter, I care not what sauce he serves with it, does an injury to himself and his guests.”

“A dinner invitation, once accepted, is a sacred obligation. If you die before the dinner takes place, your executor must attend.”

“A man with a million dollars can be as happy nowadays as though he were rich.”

### *Mrs. Marion Graves Anthon Fish*

“I do not believe in being too democratic.”

“Make yourselves at home. And believe me, there is no one who wishes you were there more heartily than I do.”

“Oh, how do you do? I'd quite forgotten I'd invited you.”



# The Dinner Party

**In the Gilded Age, entertaining was a true art and any hostess worth her salt knew how to throw a proper dinner party.**

**If you were invited to a dinner party in the Gilded Age, you'd best arrive hungry. Take a look at a typical nine-course menu according to the National Women's History Museum:**

Consommé à la Princesse

Broiled Salmon

Turbot in Lobster Sauce

Filet de Sole

Red Mullet

Trout

Lobster Rissoles

Whitebait

Canard à la Rouennaise

Mutton Cutlets

Braised Beef

Spring Chicken

Roast Quarter of Lamb

Tongue

Green Peas

Salade de Céleri et Laitue

Roast Saddle of Mutton

Quail

Roast Duck

Mayonnaise of Chicken

Cheese Course

Bonbons

Charlotte Russe

Strawberries

Compote of Cherries

Neapolitan Cakes

Wine, Champagne Claret  
Cup, Lemonade, Coffee,  
& Poland Water

# The Rich Are Different

## Things you never knew about the Gilded Age

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Caroline Schermerhorn Astor and her guests at one of her lavish balls, New York 1902.

Image is in the public domain in the United States.

**THE OPERA** was a longstanding tradition for the wealthy and privileged. The upper crust attended the opera every Monday night during the season. Opera boxes were hard to come by and certainly pricey.

- Balcony seats were \$80
- Seats on the main floor were \$125
- Mezzanine boxes were \$400 to \$600
- Balcony boxes were \$800

**THE NEWPORT SEASON** only lasted six weeks, but due to their packed social calendars, each lady was required to bring at least ninety gowns with her. Plus, due to the sea air and humidity, she needed to change her elbow gloves at least three to four times a day.

**PARTY FAVORS** included everything from brooches, necklaces and bracelets for the ladies to cufflinks, jeweled cigarette cases and cigars wrapped in \$100 bills for the gentlemen.

**MAKING YOUR DEBUT IN SOCIETY** wasn't cheap. It cost approximately \$25,000 to properly dress a debutante in the Gilded Age.

**THE 400** was a list comprised by Ward McAllister that included the official members of society. It was called The 400 because according to Ward McAllister, "There are only about 400 people in fashionable New York society. If you go outside that number you strike people who are either not at ease in a ballroom or else make other people not at ease." Others claim it was limited to 400 because that was the number of people that Mrs. Astor could comfortably fit in her ballroom.

**MINDING YOUR TABLE MANNERS** was a sign of breeding. The nouveau riche were highly criticized for eating peas with a fork rather than a fork and knife, for using their fish fork for the meat entrée and for holding their wineglasses by the bowl and not the stem.

**THE AMERICAN BEAUTY ROSE** was popularized in this country by none other than Caroline Astor. It was her favorite flower, brought over from France in the 1880s and cost \$1 per rose.

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## *About Renée*

Renée Rosen is the author of six historical novels including *What the Lady Wants* and *Park Avenue Summer* as well as a young adult novel. She is a native of Akron, Ohio, and a graduate of American University in Washington, DC. She now lives in Chicago where she is at work on a new novel about the cosmetic icon Estée Lauder (coming from Penguin Random House/Berkley in 2023).

Renée frequently visits with book clubs either in person or via Zoom/Skype/FaceTime. You can arrange to have her join your book club at Novel Network (NovelNetwork.com). She is also available for speaking engagements, which can be schedule through her website (ReneeRosen.com). While you're on her site, please don't forget to sign up for her newsletter to get updates on events, giveaways, and other news.



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