



The Big House: A Century in the Life of an American Summer Home

George Howe Colt

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Faced with the sale of the century-old family summer house on Cape Cod where he had spent forty-two summers, George Howe Colt returned for one last stay with his wife and children. This poignant tribute to the eleven-bedroom jumble of gables, bays, and dormers that watched over weddings, divorces, deaths, anniversaries, birthdays, breakdowns, and love affairs for five generations interweaves Colt's final visit with memories of a lifetime of summers. Run-down yet romantic, the *Big House* stands not only as a cherished reminder of summer's ephemeral pleasures but also as a powerful symbol of a vanishing way of life.

The Big House: A Century in the Life of an American Summer Home Details

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From Reader Review *The Big House: A Century in the Life of an American Summer Home* for online ebook

Sara says

The Big House has been part of the Colt family history since it was built by the author's great grandfather, Ned Atkinson in the very early years of the 18th century. Build on Bluff overlooking Cape Cod, it is the epitome of a bygone era, during which time all the old Boston families were building summer homes as an escape from the city. And though large and rambling, one time staffed by a host of maids and boasting a separate cottage to house the chauffeur, like other summer homes of it's era it was built to showcase the Puritan spirit that infused Boston at that time - humble, almost shabby, and certainly not a showcase for the family's immense wealth. Over time, the Atkinson family, later the Colts, lost their money and their name ceased to hold the sway it once had, though it was still loved and recognized by those with similarly prestigious pedigrees. The house, like the family, began to fall into disrepair, but despite that the family returned here every summer to fill it with laughter and memories. And that is what this book is, the memories and history of not only the house and family, but the Cape itself, as the George Colt brings his own young family here to spend one last summer before it's sold.

I didn't go into this book expecting much. I mean, how interesting could a book about the history of a summer house be? But it was a loving tribute to a man's life, to his family, and to the place he loved more than any other. It is a nostalgic and bittersweet, and utterly captivating tale of a particular American experience. And though I didn't grow up on the Cape, or even anywhere near the ocean, it made me homesick for days past. It also filled me with a desire to find a way to give my family these kind of memories. We aren't vacationers, and we certainly don't return to the same place year after year, but this book makes me wish we were. I absolutely treasure every word this author wrote and I'm deeply thankful that he wrote down his memories of that last summer, shared his family story - warts and all.

Ellen says

I loved this book for three reasons:

1. His wife, Anne Fadiman, is one of my most favorite authors, so it was fun to see her from another perspective.
2. We had a summer house up until 2003 that I loved loved loved. (We called it "camp"). Sadly, unlike *The Big House*, it did not get sold to a member of my family, and I miss it terribly. I do not think there will ever be another place as good. *The Big House* made me miss it all over again (and feel better about being so emotional over a house).
3. He has a chapter called "Money." I thought it was just my family, but it turns out there are other families who keep the thermostat at sixty, wear their great-grandmother's raincoat because "it's still good" and have dragged their great uncle's moth eaten wool blankets to boarding school and college (still with Uncle Fred's name label on it...why bother replacing it?), rather than buying a new one (I was actually at my aunt's over Christmas break, and mentioned my blanket had holes in it, and she pulled out scraps of its twin from her rag bag and gave it to me so I could patch it...). Apparently there's a whole book on this subject by Nelson Aldrich, which I can't wait to read, because it's like an ethnography of my family.

Debbie says

I need a map! And a geneology chart!! And what the heck is a Brahmin?? How have I not heard that term before? Granted, I am no Bostonian, but I did spend most of my life in the northeast... I'm so glad I'm past the architectural history and into the family's stories. I'm now able to keep my eyes open for more than 2 pages at a time! :)

6/11/11:

Okay - finished reading it this morning. (Obviously we are finished in the playoffs, or I never would have had that kind of time...) It did get a little bit better. But how is it that there is not one single picture of this Big House in the book??!! All you get is an illustration of 1/4 of a house on the cover, and who knows if that's what it really looks like... While the author went into plenty of detail about the house's structure, some of us who aren't so architecturally gifted have a hard time imagining a house that fits this description...

Cammy says

I was unpacking books today and found this great books in the bottom of a box. It is written by a man whose family has owned a home on cape Cod for 100 years and now, because of the cost of upkeep and the number of family members, it is being sold. He begins the book with his last visit to the house he has been going to all his life and then goes back to the memories of all the years it has been in the family. It is a poignant book about family, legacies, memories, and how to say good-bye to a place that has meant so much to the author and his whole family. It is a tear-jerker! I read this on an airplane and had to hide my face next to the window so my seat mate wouldn't know I was crying when he wrote about remembering his grandparents waving good-bye to them at the end of their summer visits! It is so worth reading.

Judy says

I started reading this book in much the same way the author's family used The Big House - as a vacation get-away - though in their case it was an extended summer stay. I read what I could on weekends. But I became so eager to learn what became of the house that I could no longer relegate my reading to weekends.

George Colt writes a history of the house that his great-grandfather built on Cape Cod in 1903 and that the family has enjoyed as a summer retreat for four generations. He skillfully weaves in the history of Boston and Cape Cod and the ethos of the Boston Brahmins with his personal memories of summers at the house with extended family. The house symbolizes a family that values its traditions, while it hides its personal difficulties. The nooks and crannies of the house that offered such wonderful places for Colt and his brothers and cousins to use for their childhood games of Sardines are a metaphor for the broken relationships and physical and mental ailments that family members hid from one another.

As the great house falls into disrepair, so do family relationships and the Brahmin-WASPish way of life. Facing fiscal (mounting maintenance costs) and cultural reality (family members widely dispersed and lacking time and interest to spend an entire summer at the house)the family agrees to put the house on the market. While the house languishes on the market for several years, Colt mourns its loss even as members of

his grandparents' and parents' generation pass on.

Colt's account is a loving memoir to a place that has held a family together for generations--despite both the home's and the family's idiosyncrasies.

Kris says

Reading G.H. Colt's *The Big House* you may find yourself shutting the book at page 150, and thinking to yourself, "Wait, why do I feel sorry for this dude -- in the original sense of the word -- who summers every August in Wings Neck? Because he's losing his summer home? Errr ..."

Yet, you can't help but be intrigued by Colt's well-written book. He has tale after tale to tell about his time spent at his summer home, built many generations ago by his great-great-great ... great grandfather, Ned Atkinson -- the original Bostonian Brahmin.

I did raise my eyebrow more than once as I read through certain sections. Like, the table of contents, which contains chapters titled, "Sailing" and "Tennis" which is fine, except for the fact that they sit directly under a chapter called "Plain Living." And it's quite plain, from the sum of his stories, that he embraces this type of irony.

This book does read a bit like a collection of 20 college admission essays, each answering the prompt, "What makes you tick? And, how does it impact the way you look at the world around you?" Which is to say, you might get bored at bits here and there, but if you actually stick it out, you may find more than you might immediately expect.

Stephen says

I was disappointed with this book. It was mainly the author's incessant whining about all the wonderful events in their "summer lives," on Cape Cod as opposed to their winter lives in Boston and of course dispersed around the world in wonderful places: London, New York, Greenwich, Montreal. It reminded me of a certain columnist in the *York Sunday News* who wrote about his kids college experiences as though they were the only two teenagers to ever go away to college. The author writes as though he and his extended family were the only ones in history to have gotten up before dawn and rowed a boat into the bay to fish, or play croquet, or sit on a porch and husk corn, or read a book sitting on the porch when it was raining, or collect seashells, or have a camp fire and sing songs, or talk about crazy ancestors, or swim, or play tennis etc etc etc ad nauseam . Get a life! So maybe this is the purpose of memoirs, somewhat cathartic, but it was not worth the time I spent when there are so many other good things to read. Glad I only paid 50 cents at for it at the Salisbury Free Public Library. Oh there I am bragging about my wonderful summer and that no one else is having one!!!!

Lori says

I think this will be one of those quiet books whose impact doesn't really hit you until after you've finished.

It's a slow mover, lots of history and details (some of which I bypassed or skimmed, especially the sailing parts, but I looked forward to reading it every day and I'll probably thinking about it quite a bit now that I'm done. The family tree stuff gets confusing and by the end I couldn't remember who was who, but the family history is interesting. I wish the author had included pictures - I'd love to see what the house looked like inside and out. But maybe my imagination is better.

Karen says

I am really enjoying this book written about a place I am not at all familiar with. The history is so interesting and I love picturing the house with all it's additions and nooks and crannies. But the edition I have really needs a map and a picture of the house (from the ocean side). I used Google map to find out where Wing's neck is and try to identify the house but it is still not satisfying.

Now that I finished it, I find it's one of those books where you miss the people and the place. I would like to go back and start all over again and discover the big house.

Mark says

I have read few books so desperately in need of editing as George Howe Colt's *The Big House*. Colt tells the story of the grand old summer house on Cape Cod that has been in his family for over a century. If he had stuck to the story of that house, this would have been a very fine book. But the endless meditations on the peculiarities of Boston society are profoundly wearying. I can't even imagine a proper Bostonian putting up with page after page after page of his blather.

That said, there are some fine passages in life in an old summer house on the sea:

"...through our stay, the Big House has a well-settled look. The doors and windows are wide open. The front porch is littered with baseball mitts, snorkels, buckets, flip-flops, strands of dried and slightly odoriferous seaweed, scallop shells, and a rubber ball painted green and blue to resemble the earth. Wiffle balls, bats, Frisbees, badminton rackets, and a bicycle are scattered across the lawn. The clothesline is draped with colorful beach towels, fluttering like the pennants on the New York Yacht Club boats that used to anchor in the harbor each Fourth of July. Inside, a modest natural history collection accumulates on a bedroom sill: several jingle shells, a whelk's egg case, a moon snail's operculum, a beige horseshoe-crab cast the size of a silver dollar. No matter how much we sweep, small shoals of sand linger here and there, making a soft shuffling sound under our feet."

One of the big themes of the book is the tremendous resistance to change that typifies old-guard Boston society.

"Like Plimoth Plantation or Colonial Williamsburg, the Big House is to be preserved intact, uncontaminated either by throwing anything out or by willingly introducing anything new. Any change is likely the result of serendipity: a book left on a bedside table, a shell on a mantelpiece, a toy car on the kitchen floor. If no one removes them immediately, they will likely be granted tenure. Several years ago, an iron bedstead in the Little Nursery lost a caster. For two summers the resulting tilt was ignored. This summer we arrived to find that a copy of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* had been placed under the shortened leg. We haven't touched it.

Recently, sweeping up after a weekend of houseguests, I came across a guitar pick. For the time being, I put it in the wooden dish on the front hall shelf where the key to the Chelsea clock is kept. I know that if the house were not being sold, that guitar pick would remain there for decades, as immovable as a barnacle. My grandchildren would assume that Ned Atkinson played the guitar, and would venerate the pick as a holy relic."

Charming. If only the author had stuck to the This Old House theme. Really, a nice magazine article, perhaps for The Atlantic, would have been more than enough.

Lizz says

Clearly brings back the atmosphere of summers on New England beaches. Wonderfully romantic read.

Sallee says

I found this memoir interesting as the author took us through the life of a huge summer house shared by several generations of his very large family. House history and family histories made this part memoir and part biography a bittersweet story, slowly moving to the story's close.

Sam says

This book really hit home for me. As my Dad said after reading this book, EVERYONE has a 'Big House' whether it is an actual house, people, a place, or just a time of your life that is ephemeral. This chronicles the story of a house that has been a part of the New England Colt family for several generations and how once their family fortune was squandered after many many years, it became impossible to keep this house in which so many memories were born. It is at times hysterical, tragic, heartwarming, and always familiar. The authors father is one of my grandfather's best friends so I must say this book struck a real chord with me. Loved it!

Rach Ashby says

Although it took me all summer to read - I thoroughly enjoyed the vivid pictures that were created through word. I can relate to Colt's attachment to a Big House.

Kimberly says

This book came to my attention through it being on the list of National Book Finalists. I thought the premise of writing the history of a house sounded intriguing so I got it from the library. From the first page, Colt's

prose resonated with me so I did the most reasonable thing - I returned the library book and ordered a copy of my own. I placed sticky notes on pages where I found beautifully written sentences, paragraphs, and profound ideas. My entire book has sticky notes coming out of it! The history and context of the New England coast provide a nice backdrop to the story of the Colt family and the Big House. I feel like I've been there.
