Cheerful Money: Me, My Family, and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor by Tad Friend

Hilariously Wistful

Tad Friends family is nothing if not illustrious: his father was president of Swarthmore College, and at Smith his mother came in second in a poetry contest judged by W.H. Auden--to Sylvia Plath. For centuries, Wasps like his ancestors dominated American life. But then, in the 60s, their fortunes began to fall. As a young man, Tad noticed that his family tree, for all its glories, was full of alcoholics, depressives, and reckless eccentrics. Yet his identity had already been shaped by the family’s age-old traditions and expectations. Part memoir, part family history, and part cultural study of the long swoon of the American Wasp, Cheerful Money is a captivating examination of a cultural crack-up and a man trying to escape its wreckage.

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My Personal Review:
This is a wonderful book. In an effort to understand his own rather constrained, Wasp nature, Tad Friend researches the lives of his various relatives--for the most part cheerful enough affairs on the surface (most of the time), but seething with a kind of quiet heartbreak. Friend himself would seem the picture of contentment: a successful NEW YORKER writer, a droll attractive fellow with loads of droll attractive friends, he yet feels a numbness of the soul that he cant quite understand. Coming to terms with this--the Wasp emotional inheritance--is the burden of this book. Nicely structured with a lot of contrapuntal set pieces about this or that relative, this or that girlfriend, the story draws one irresistibly along--and one might as well say it: I laughed and I cried, pretty much in equal parts. What I liked best about the book was the (how to put it?) companionability of the author--like a charming (but hitherto somewhat aloof) old pal who has a few too many one night and decides to bare his soul, half-seriously, though his audience comes to take him very seriously indeed.

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