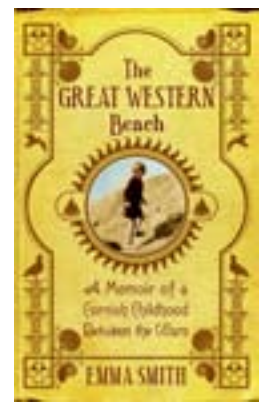
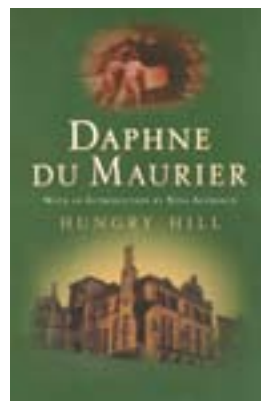




A wealth of new books capture the fragility and innocence of gilded youth



# Beautiful and damned

The fragile, often destructive, life of the gilded youth offers rich narrative for a host of new books, says Frances Osbourne

**a** few years ago I was handed the First World War diaries of my great-grandfather Euan, written in his early twenties. When I peeled apart their featherweight pages the most vivid descriptions were not of the battles he fought but of his precious moments on leave. In the throes of war, Euan and my 24-year-old great-grandmother Idina met at the Ritz Paris, ordered dresses at Lanvin, walked around with friends' pet lion cubs and played tennis in long-sleeved ankle-length whites. In London they clambered into their open-top Rolls with a gang of other gilded youths and careered to boat clubs by day, and balls in mansions by night.

Idina, Euan and their friends were young, beautiful and rich as they would ever need to be. I was mesmerised by this *jeunesse dorée* – all the more so given the heartbreak of the rest of Idina's life, whose biography, *The Bolter* (Virago, £19), I was working on at the time.

The trouble with gilt is that it wears off. Euan and Idina's marriage cracked under the weight of his vast fortune. Idina bolted to Kenya. But her attempts to recreate her gilded youth dissolved into "Happy Valley", a

scandalous culture of bed-hopping and wife-swapping which culminated in the White Mischief murder of her third husband, the Earl of Erroll. After five divorces, Idina died with a picture of Euan by her bed, the gilt in her life rubbed bare.

money or cradling maternal arms but simply by the possibilities with which it burgeons and which, as we age, slip through our fingers. As LP Hartley writes at the beginning of *The Go-Between*, a novel of childhood innocence destroyed, "Ask yourself whether [life] has fulfilled your hopes." And, as an armful of new books suggests, this gap between promise and reality offers a wealth of narrative potential.

This summer *The Bolter* is far from alone in its portrayal of gilded youth. Early life can be gilded not just by overt privilege, The previously out-of-print Daphne du Maurier novel *Hungry Hill* (Virago, £8) tells the story of gilded youth squandered. Hungry Hill is the name of the Irish copper mine which provides the Brodricks with enough money to

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allow each son to indulge in high-spending tours of the Continent and careers in the cavalry. But each also inherits a family weakness of will, and sparks start to fly from du Maurier's pen as she grips the reader with the anguish of their battles against their fate.

In his memoir *Cold Cream* (Bloomsbury, £20), former Thatcher-speechwriter Ferdinand

Mount remembers a life scattered with politicians, princes and writers (his uncle was Anthony Powell). The contrast between his childhood experiences and how he now views them through grandfatherly eyes shows the inescapable longing for a lost youth and even direct criticisms of his upbringing – "We should not have needed a jar of cold cream to touch one another's cheek" – evoke the inherent magic of times gone by.

In *The Great Western Beach* (Bloomsbury, £15), novelist Emma Smith appears at first to present her interwar youth as a seamless idyll unmarred by her parents' misery or the strap in her father's hands. However, the narrative is foreshadowed by a warning that it will end at the age of 12 for, after that, Smith sums up, "everything changed". As the 12-year-old Smith leaves her seaside life, the prose reverts to darkening retrospection. "Goodbye, my childhood," she writes, "my poor tragic parents... How I wish I could have saved you," reminding the reader that the innocence of her childhood is one that will imminently be lost.

Finally, in photographer Roger Moenks' book *Inheriting Beauty* (Powerhouse Books, £40), the portraits of 90 beautiful, wealthy young women reveal how gilded youth has

changed. The gilt of today is not necessarily spending power but rather the ability to "raise millions of dollars for charities," writes William Norwich in the prologue. Unlike the preceding books, there is no gap between promise and reality to tell a tale of youth squandered or lost – these women are portrayed in a prime that, on these pages, will not decay. ■

### Poetic licence



#### Celebrating the life of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca

This month more than 30 artists, including Gilbert and George (*far left*), will be showing new works inspired by Spanish poet Federico García Lorca at his house, the Huerta de San Vicente in Granada (Huertadesanvicente.com). The results serve both as a tribute and a subtle conversation with the poet. While in Granada, stay at the heavenly La Almunia del Valle (*left*) – a simple but elegant boutique hotel that's 10 minutes drive from the city centre. Visit [l-escape.com](http://l-escape.com) for more information.