

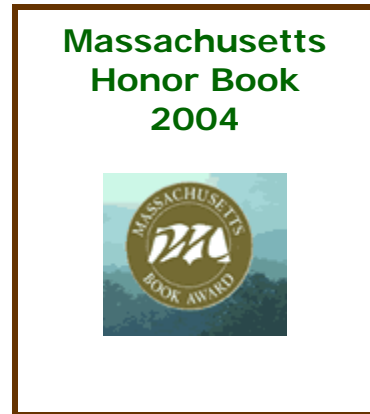
# *The Big House: A Century in the Life of an American Summer Home*

By George Howe Colt

Scribner

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Georgia Titonis  
Upham's Corner Branch of the Boston Public Library



### **SUMMARY:**

The Big House is an eleven-bedroom summer cottage in Wings Neck, Cape Cod. It was built by Ned Atkinson, the great grandfather of the author, and it has existed at the center of the family for 100 years, sheltering them and providing them with “an unchanging point in a changing world.” Now it is going to be sold.

Author George Howe Colt takes us on an ambling journey, showing the good and the bad of his extended family. Concentrating on the house and its surrounding lands, Colt draws on memories of forty-two summers to demonstrate the importance of the structure in the history of his genealogy.

Like all good observers, Colt takes the time to explore the area. Forward progress is not the point, and the narrative is frequently interrupted by whatever takes the author’s fancy, from the history of Cape Cod to the unspoiled beauty of a piece of sea glass to the crashing of the waves on Buzzards bay.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. In the first chapter, Colt writes about perceptions of the Big House – a Fairytale Castle, a Ghost House...how did you see the house and what most influenced this perception?
2. Names and labels are very prominent in the author’s work. What does this propensity for defining person, place and thing say about the people who stayed in the Big House and the structure of their society?
3. Colt does not choose a chronological structure for this book. What might the reasons be for this choice? How does this add or detract from the story?

4. Do you think this book about a family of Boston Brahmins and their summer house appeals to people from other parts of the country? And how would the book be different if it were chronicling a house in a different community or a different part of the country?
5. The Colt family is supposedly on their last visit as owners of the Big House. If you were the author, would you be willing to sell it? Why or why not?
6. How did you feel about Colt's portrayal of the rampant bigotry within the Boston Brahmins? If the family and the house are metaphors for one another, how are they used to show the flaws of the society which built them both?
7. Do you think this would be a fun place to spend a summer? Why or why not?

### **ACTIVITIES:**

1. Bring in your pictures, shells, sea glass etc. from your latest visit to the Cape.
2. Make a family tree out of yarn, with a different color for each branch of the family.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

[Compiled from a variety of sources; the majority is from the book's flyleaf]

George Howe Colt is a former staff writer at *Life* magazine and has written for *The New York Times*, *Civilization*, and *Mother Jones*. He is the author of one previous work of nonfiction, *The Enigma of Suicide* (1992). Mr. Colt is married to Anne Fadiman, who is the editor of the cultural quarterly *The American Scholar* and author of two books including the National Book Critic's Choice Winner, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall*. They live in rural western Massachusetts with their two children.

Other books by the author:

*The Enigma of Suicide: A Timely Investigation into the Causes, the Possibilities for Prevention and the Paths to Healing*

## HELPFUL LINKS:

Meet the writers @ Barnes and Noble:

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=1179562&userid=lp2GDw5Cro#Interview>

Book Club Reader: <http://www.simonsays.com/content/content.cfm?sid=33&pid=353601>

## Reviews

Working Waterfront: <http://www.workingwaterfront.com/review.asp?StoryID=20040732>

Additional reviews

*Booklist* May 15, 2003 v99 i18 p1635(1)

*The Economist (US)* June 21, 2003 v367 i8329 p78US

*Library Journal* July 2003 v128 i12 p80(1)

*The New York Times Book Review* July 6, 2003 v108 p8

*Publishers Weekly* May 12, 2003 v250 i19 p57(1)

## Exploring Wings Neck/Buzzards Bay

Wings Neck Lighthouse - <http://www.lighthouse.cc/wingsneck/>

Buzzards Bay - <http://www.city-data.com/city/Buzzards-Bay-Massachusetts.html>



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