

Born Rich: Blessing or Curse?

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I'm not the only rich kid worried about the voodoo of inherited wealth." With these words, 21-year-old Jamie Johnson, heir



to the Johnson & Johnson fortune, set out to record his peers' angst over coming into vast inheritances.

The result is "Born Rich," a first-rate documentary in which Johnson interviewed 10 friends, several times each—in their New York City and country homes, in boutiques, on the street, in their families' offices and factories, and in the poshest clubs from Southampton to Palm Beach. He cuts to historic portraits, newsreel footage, tabloid headlines, favorite snapshots. A dorm room where S.I. Newhouse IV feels comfortable is contrasted with the plush Manhattan loft where he does not. Ivanka Trump's childhood bedroom is preserved as a shrine to lost fantasies of normalcy (TV sitcom trading cards and rock band posters), the illusion spoiled by its 68th floor view over Central Park.

In short, we don't just hear what these young people have to say, we feel we come to know them as distinct individuals.

Trusting his audience to draw their own conclusions—or no conclusions—Johnson's 69-minute essay manages to touch on many issues. Yet a central question gives it focus: Is a big inheritance the enemy of happiness because it precludes *earning* one's fortune?

Pursuing his father's suggestion that a satisfactory life's work for him might be to build a really

good collection of maps, letters, and documents, Johnson consults an anti-quarian bookseller. "What advice would you give me, considering that I don't actually have to work?"

"Then don't work!" the man exclaims, laughing, "Why would anybody work if they don't have to?" He doesn't get it. The inheritors in this film attribute significant unhappiness to circumstances that accompany wealth, including hurtful publicity, ostracism, lack of purpose, and that internal voodoo, "I didn't earn it." Media heir Newhouse says the media place happiness in the middle classes: "Having everything money can buy is held up as an ideal but ... we don't see happiness in the very rich." Josiah Hornblower says many of his peers' lifestyle "really holds them back from discovering their passions and what would make them feel good about life."

The friends express a paradoxical view of work: they'll pursue it intensely because they don't have to. Georgina Bloomberg notes that when people say she won a jumping or show category only because she had the best horse (in fact, eight barns full of them), it's an incentive for her to work harder. Newhouse plans "my little form of revenge": going to grad school for a Ph.D. Taking oneself seriously, it seems, is revenge against the curse of having inherited rather than earned wealth.

"Nobody wants to talk about money," Johnson says. He lectures his father, "If you never examine it, you'll never really understand it and you'll never be able to resolve any of the issues." As if to prove his son right, James Loring Johnson is repeatedly inarticulate on why it isn't a good idea to broach this subject at all, much less with a film crew. We peer with the son into the studio where

this man of painfully few words seeks to express himself. We don't see his work, only the colorful palette, and all the brushes money can buy.

Cutting from friend to friend, the director/interviewer takes us chronologically from the sources of their wealth ("They were crooks," says Hornblower of his Vanderbilt and Whitney forebears, "but everybody was a crook back then, who made money") through early childhood, school, adolescence, dating and looking ahead to pre-nuptials, marriage and divorce.

Compelling are the differences among these 11 individuals in values, attitudes, and life goals. They run the gamut from the introspective, endearing Newhouse, Johnson and Hornblower, to the contemptuous yet self-loathing Luke Weil, to the pretentious caricature of a European baron, Carlo von Zeitschel. In contrast to Bloomberg's apparent comfort with her chosen path as an equestrienne ("My sister's the business one in the family, the prize daughter. Doing what I love to do, it doesn't really matter to me what others think"), and Trump's pride in the family business, are three other women and one man who acknowledge their vanity and obsessive shopping, without revealing any other goals.

Weil complains that his circle does its partying in nightclubs, when they could more comfortably get drunk and do those same drugs in one another's homes without having to rub shoulders with the *hoi polloi* (rich *hoi polloi*—judging by the size of the quoted bar bills—but not rich enough, apparently).

Distinctions are important to this crowd, even within their circle: old/new money, European/American,

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WASP/Jewish. Great-grandson of Kaiser Wilhelm, von Zeitschel claims unassailable superiority no matter how badly he behaves (and plans to behave), even if the families with new money have more of it. Although the Jewish members of this circle don't feel second-class in any way, new money heiress Christina Floyd wonders whether she jeopardized her parents' conditional acceptance at their club by bringing Jewish friends to lunch.

Only those who are children of wealth creators express pride in their parents, while those who are later generation descendants disparage the old robber barons, and view their parents as victims of their wealth. Juliet Hartford muses that her father, Huntington, might have been a simple, happy person instead of a drugged-out wastrel if he'd never inherited the A&P fortune. Johnson attributes his father's depressed life to Grandfather's scandalous divorce in favor of the young upstairs maid.

A few parents are credited with having positive impact on the child's development, as when Hornblower's parents pulled him out of college to work in the oil fields for two years. But there are more examples of negative influence: pulling strings to protect kids from consequences of bad behavior; ignoring the emotional impact of divorce upon them while the parents fought over money, homes, yachts and jets. These young people are refreshingly concerned about their parents. They feel sorry for them and wonder if they might have had a chance for happiness if fate hadn't dealt them the inheritance card. Johnson asks, "What kind

of people would my parents have been able to be, had they not inherited that money?”

Unfortunately, we don't hear how they expect to handle these matters with their own children. Nor do they discuss potential sources of meaning in life besides “careers” in business or the professions. The idea of collecting as worthy connoisseurship is trivialized; philanthropy is dismissed as something our families do that doesn't count as a career; diplomacy and politics aren't mentioned. (Daddy Bloomberg wasn't yet mayor when these interviews were filmed.)

As much as their fortunes hurt, these subjects share a fear of losing them through disinheritance, bad investments or dissolute spending. Yet they don't talk about taking charge and fighting against that fate by growing their fortunes. It would be valuable to hear from them in 10 years, at 30 or so.

One mustn't generalize from these glimpses into 11 young people who happened to be the filmmaker's friends. He's giving us his own view of them. That said, it's a terrific discussion stimulator on the subject of inherited wealth.

The opening and closing scenes show the filmmaker's Gatsby-themed 21st birthday party with the interviewed friends in attendance. We are left doubting their chance of finding any more happiness than their parents did. Johnson himself, though, with such a solidly produced documentary, has established credentials for a serious career—if he wants one. **FOX**