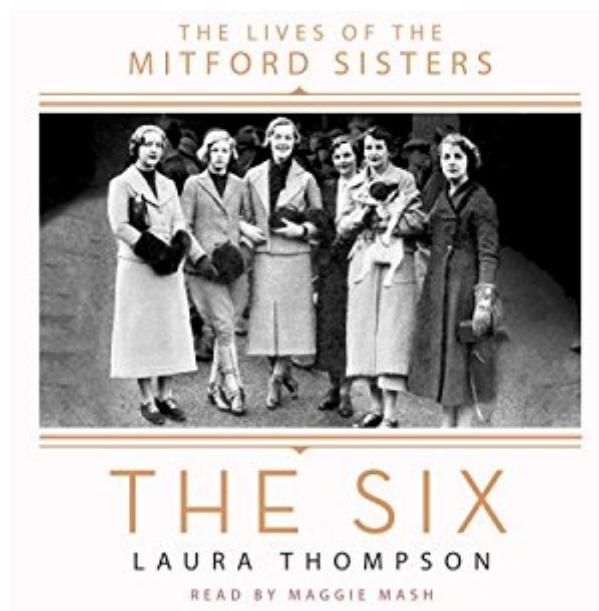


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The Six: The Lives Of The Mitford Sisters



Synopsis

The eldest was a razor-sharp novelist of upper-class manners; the second was loved by John Betjeman; the third was a fascist who married Oswald Mosley; the fourth idolized Hitler and shot herself in the head when Britain declared war on Germany; the fifth was a member of the American Communist Party; the sixth became Duchess of Devonshire. They were the Mitford sisters: Nancy, Pamela, Diana, Unity, Jessica, and Deborah. Born into country-house privilege in the early years of the 20th century, they became prominent as "bright young things" in the high society of interwar London. Then, as the shadows crept over 1930s Europe, the stark - and very public - differences in their outlooks came to symbolize the political polarities of a dangerous decade. The intertwined stories of their stylish and scandalous lives - recounted in masterly fashion by Laura Thompson - hold up a revelatory mirror to upper-class English life before and after WWII. The Six was previously published as *Take Six Girls*.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The six daughters of the 2nd Lord Redesdale were born between 1904 and 1920, and their lives whether short or long have come to emulate much of the twentieth century's brightest and darkest periods. Laura Thompson's joint biography of the sisters focuses on their lives as part of one family that was sometimes loving, often in conflict, and always eccentric. The timeframe runs roughly from the marriage of their parents (but including some necessary preliminary background) to the death of their widowed mother in 1963, with an Afterword summarizing the sisters' later years. The Mitford Girls in order of birth were Nancy, a highly successful novelist and historian; Pamela, who quietly

suffered the aftereffects of polio and possibly some learning disabilities, leading a quiet rural life for the most part; glamorous Diana, who made a glittering Society wedding at 18 and then left her husband for Sir Oswald Mosley and Fascism; Unity, so enamored of Hitler and Nazism that she became notorious in her early twenties, then died from the after effects of a botched suicide attempt in 1948; Jessica the Communist, a rebel who abandoned her parents and sisters and eventually became a notable muckraking journalist in the United States; and Deborah, who married a man who became Duke of Devonshire, making her the chatelaine of one of the grandest private houses in England. The six girls, along with their beloved only brother Tom (who was killed at the end of World War II) had an aristocratic but eccentric upbringing. Their father inherited a sizeable estate but lost nearly all of it to bad management and bad luck, while their mother was notably detached from her husband and children even by Edwardian standards.

Of course, the Mitfords weren't just any six girls. As Laura Thompson reminds readers in this biography, they could trace their ancestry back to before the Norman conquest of 1066 -- none of this "came over with William the Conqueror" nonsense for them. They benefitted from beauty and (to tremendously varying degrees) from brains, and all, so Thompson argues, possessed the ineffable charm of the English upper classes that seduces even those that resolve to be immune to it -- like the author herself, in her interactions with the last two survivors of the six, Diana Moseley and Deborah, the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, both of whom she interviewed as part of her research for this book. Why write the biography in the first place? Nancy Mitford, arguably, took on the role of making more of the sisters' lives than they may ever have deserved in her own fiction (eg "The Pursuit of Love"), while Jessica Mitford's "Hons and Rebels", published in 1960, finished up the job. By then, of course, at least two of them were notorious. Diana had abandoned and divorced her husband in order to marry the head of the British Fascist party, Sir Oswald Moseley (with whom she spent World War II either in prison or under house arrest, which she carried off with great bravado, enjoying the fact that she had her husband to herself, ordering a fur coat to withstand the cold weather in jail, and looking down her nose at the little people scrawling obscenities on her front door. Unity, more dramatically, had fallen at the feet of Hitler; idolizing him, she shot herself on the day war was declared, taking years to die. Jessica, perhaps in reaction to her sisters' fascist sympathies, became a communist.

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