

PICADOR

Reading Group Gold

The Six: The Lives of the Mitford Sisters

Laura Thompson

ABOUT THE BOOK

An Instant *New York Times* Bestseller

“Riveting. *The Six* captures all the wayward magnetism and levity that have enchanted countless writers without neglecting the tragic darkness of many of the sisters’ life choices and the savage sociopolitical currents that fueled them.” —Tina Brown, *The New York Times Book Review*

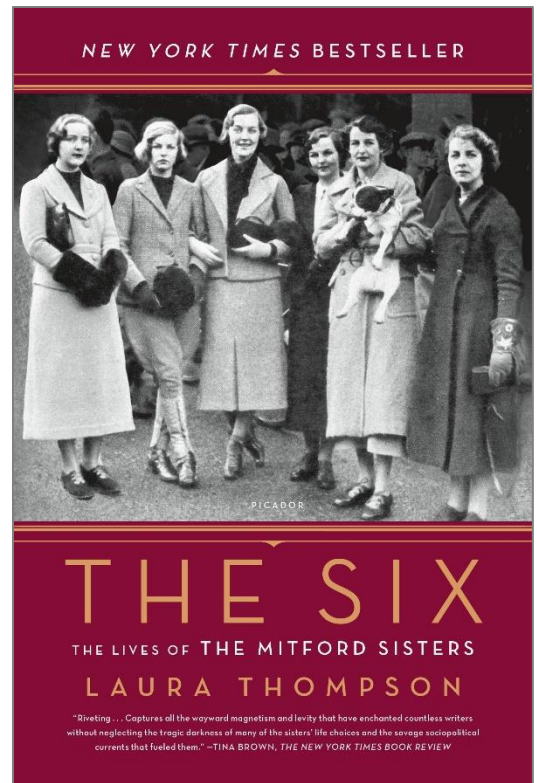
The eldest was a razor-sharp novelist of upper-class manners; the second was loved by John Betjeman; the third was a fascist who married Oswald Mosley; the fourth idolized Hitler and shot herself in the head when Britain declared war on Germany; the fifth was a member of the American Communist Party; 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 twentieth 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 World War II.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The author claims, “The phenomenon of the Mitford sisters is unrepeatable. The nature of the girls, the nature of the world at that time: such a configuration can never happen again.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?



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2. Deborah's debutante season was complicated by the fact that "her sisters had cast a shadow across the family name. Worse, they made it something of a joke. To the press, the girls were the Hon. Kardashians, styled in black shirts and red flags." Discuss the role of the press in crafting this image of the Mitford sisters. In what ways did the media participate in casting this shadow?
3. Diana's "first decisive act . . . the cool shattering of every convention that went with setting herself apart from society as Mosley's mistress," is cited as the event that precipitated the sisters' ongoing competition through various social and political causes. If Diana hadn't struck up with Mosley, in what ways do you think the other sisters' paths may have been different?
4. Nancy's novels "were essentially engaged with the question of what constitutes a successful marriage: the question . . . of whether it is possible for love and reality to coexist." How do you see each sister wrestle with this question in her own life?
5. David and Sydney were strong personalities with unconventional parenting tactics. Do you think they contributed to their daughters' rebellions? How so?
6. Tom Mitford was "the person whom everybody both respected and liked. To achieve that, all he really had to do was be male and keep relatively quiet." Yet, Tom's life wasn't without its own pressures. What were some of those pressures? How did Tom's social situation differ from his sisters'?
7. The author asserts, "Mitford girls had a weakness for strong men." But the Mitford girls, too, were strong women. In what ways did strong men influence their varying political beliefs? How do you see the Mitford sisters, in turn, influence the men around them?
8. What do you make of Diana and Unity's relationships with Hitler? Their associations with the Nazi party? How would you describe their motivations and their politics?
9. There are continual references to Unity's potential "madness," and her suicide attempt seems to indicate some level of psychological instability. How does her mental state color your outlook on her life decisions?
10. Do you think Unity acted treasonously toward England prior to her suicide attempt? Why or why not? Do you agree that, "the 'crimes' of which Diana was accused were more truly Unity's" or was Diana fully deserving of her trial?
11. Laura Thompson points out the "peculiarly Mitfordian conflation of the personal and the political." How do you interpret this statement? In what ways do you see this intermingling of the personal and political play out in the Mitford family history?

12. The questioning and surveillance that Jessica endured in the U.S. for her leftist activities mirrors, in many ways, what Diana experienced for her fascist leanings in England during and after the war. What similarities can you draw between these two sisters' lives? How do they diverge?
13. Nancy's novel, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, is the lightly guised story of the Mitford family. This book not only mythologized the sisters, but from its success, "the Mitfords became a commodity." In what ways do you see the trajectory of the Mitfords mirror the modern celebrity family? How were their experiences different from what we might see today?

Guide Written by Laura Chasen



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