



THE  
MITFORD  
AFFAIR

BY NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARIE BENEDICT

THE EXCLUSIVE BOOK CLUB GUIDE



# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I stumbled across the rarified, mesmerizing, often peculiar world of the Mitfords during college, when a dear friend and I backpacked across Europe after a semester abroad in England. Before we departed, I'd picked up a couple books for the long train stretches from country to country, and one was a trade paperback containing the two best Nancy Mitford novels, *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*. I became immediately hooked on the semi-hilarious, semi-tragic, always singular world of Nancy Mitford, a stand-in for her own upbringing, familial universe, and social realm, and that fascination continued over the years as I turned from practicing law to writing.

I recently dipped into some research about the Mitfords that I'd started back then. As I scampered down the rabbit hole into the historical documentation of those interwar years, I was gobsmacked, to use Mitford lingo. I'd expected to discover a lighthearted romp through the past alongside these aristocratic "it girls"—perhaps shot through with the occasional deeper musings and issues—but what I actually found shocked me.

These well-heeled, pedigreed sisters had placed themselves at the epicenter of scandal and political intrigue in the lead-up to World War II, dabbling in and then embracing fascism, communism, and Nazism. Given the access they had to the upper echelons of society and leadership of most European countries, their actions were at the epicenter of potentially world-changing events. In the case of Diana and possibly Unity, their decisions threatened to alter the trajectory of their times, had incarceration and catastrophe not befallen them.

I began to think that perhaps the questions evoked by *The Mitford Affair* might well be questions we could ask ourselves and others—after reading the novel and in book discussions. Maybe, just maybe, in the safe space of those conversations, we might avoid the terrible pitfalls faced by the Mitfords and draw one step closer to understanding one another and healing those divides.

—MARIE BENEDICT



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# READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Before reading *The Mitford Affair*, were you familiar with the famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) Mitford sisters? If so, how has your understanding of these eccentric, beautiful, aristocratic sisters changed, if at all?
2. Nancy is concerned that Diana is considering divorce, particularly because her new partner will not be leaving his own marriage. Why is Nancy so concerned? What is behind Diana's decision?
3. Unity thinks that the only thing that distinguishes her from her sisters is her awkwardness. What are her strengths? Why don't others notice them?
4. Nicknames abound among the Mitford sisters. What purposes do these names serve?
5. What was the appeal of fascist rhetoric for people in Britain and people like Diana and Unity in particular? What promises did the BUF make? Had they attained power, would they have been able to keep those promises?
6. Diana and Unity are reprimanded for attending the Nuremberg rally wearing bright lipstick. How were German beauty standards shaped by fascist ideas? What social issues are reflected in our modern beauty trends?
7. How do Nancy's concerns about privacy, reputation, and loyalty affect her conversations with her sisters? What finally goads her into taking a more active role against their dangerous beliefs?
8. While waiting to hear if she'll see Hitler during her time in Berlin, Diana has a moment of self-reflection and doubt that startles her. How do you think the events of the book would be different if she questioned herself more?
9. On a couple of occasions, as she tries to make sense of her sister's decisions against the complicated, incendiary developments happening across Europe, Nancy observes that political decisions are often based on personal motivations. What do you think this means in the context of Diana and Unity? Do you think that observation applies in modern times?
10. Though Nancy is clever enough to understand the danger of the radio station documents, her loyalty to Diana wins out for a long time. How does that compare to Diana's treatment of Unity?
11. Nancy asks herself, "Does [a single motivation] matter as long as we think we are acting on the side of right and truth? Or must we be on the actual side of right?" How would you answer those questions?
12. In the final chapter, Nancy suggests that she may have misapprehended her sisters' actions and the reasons underpinning them. Did this make you reassess the chapters attributed to Diana and Unity throughout the book? Is it possible that those accounts do not reflect what actually transpired (in the fictional world of *The Mitford Affair*) but rather they reflect Nancy's presumptions and projections about her sisters' activities based on her own, very personal beliefs?






# A CONVERSATION WITH MARIE BENEDICT

**It's clear that despite her own beliefs, Nancy found it very difficult to act against her sisters, especially before the outbreak of war. When writing a character like Nancy, are you ever tempted to add more fiction or push her into a more active role than she took in real life?**

Yes! In actuality, while the record reflects that Nancy did report about her sister's activities to MI5 and that report played a role in Diana's incarceration, I was not able to locate documentation that Nancy engaged in the more active spying activities that I depicted in the book, although she must have been collecting information on her sister's whereabouts and companions informally for years, particularly as the political landscape shifted. Consequently, I did add more action than I was able to verify in the record, in part because I found Diana and Unity's behavior so unbelievably appalling and Nancy's inaction in those earlier years difficult to fathom, aside from the obvious internal conflict. That said, hindsight is twenty-twenty, and of course, Nancy would not have been privy to everything we know now—but still! I didn't want to stray too far, however, from what the record reflects, and the book reflects that compromise.

**What kinds of sources did you consult to learn about the Mitford sisters and their world? When looking at writing they published more broadly, like Nancy's books or Unity's articles, does the intended audience change the way you interpret their perspectives?**

In some ways, the Mitford sisters are the best chroniclers of their own histories and the most crucial sources, even though there are myriad books written by others about them. Between them, they've penned many books and countless shorter pieces—a mix of biographies about each other, biographies about others, autobiographies, nonfiction on a variety of topics, articles, and, of course, Nancy's famous semi-autobiographical post-World War II novels, *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, and her less famous novels as well. Each of these books, in its own way, shares different slices



of the Mitford sisters' lives. That said, given the sisters' penchant for larger than life tales and the way their writings shifted depending on the nature of their audiences, those writings need to be taken with a grain of salt—and often, I found myself turning to their actual letters to one another as a rich and engrossing source of information about them.

**Diana and Unity seem to get involved with fascism largely to further other agendas in their personal lives. Can we divorce our politics from our personal lives? Should we?**

In part, the way in which politics and political figures affected the Mitfords and their relationships with one another drew me to this part of their history; it is so very timely in some ways. The further I delved into the almost unbelievable manner in which Diana and Unity became fascinated, even obsessed, with fascism, the clearer it became that, for these two sisters, politics was intensely personal. This notion, in fact, is a theme in Nancy's writings. And the more I considered it—the more I examined the world around me through that lens—the truer it seemed to be for most people; did people really land on a political belief system first and build a worldview around it as I'd sort of always thought, or did they have a personal worldview and select a political perspective based on it, I began to wonder. Throughout the writing of this book and beyond, I've speculated as to whether it's even possible to divorce the personal from the political, and I haven't yet arrived at an answer.

**Unity's suicide attempts drastically altered Nancy's perspective. Do you think she would have been so willing to assist Churchill without seeing consequences that hit so close to home?**

As I was investigating Nancy's life and her sisters' actions while building this story, I found Nancy's inability to act for so long—knowing what she knew—so frustrating! But then I thought about my own siblings, and I realized that it would take something truly momentous for me to put them and their futures at risk by reporting any questionable activities to the authorities (not that they engage in questionable activities, mind you!). I am not surprised that it took the nearly fatal suicide attempt by Unity to push Nancy to act against Diana, but that doesn't mean I didn't find Nancy's passivity disheartening. I do think that, even if Unity hadn't taken that drastic, terrible act of shooting herself, Nancy would have eventually disclosed Diana's plans as the war progressed and the scope and scale of Hitler's evil revealed itself. I hope so, anyway.

**Between the three sisters, did you have a favorite perspective to write? Who was the most difficult to understand from the inside out?**

Without question, I found Unity's point of view the most challenging to comprehend and write about. Even without the benefit of hindsight, I wondered how she could possibly be intrigued by a politician as odious and evil as Hitler! I found it extremely difficult to look at him and the Nazis through Unity's eyes and see anything other than wickedness. But as often happens while writing historical fiction, I have to remind myself that she didn't know all that we know—even still, I found it incredibly difficult to adopt her mindset, no matter how fictional. I probably enjoyed writing Nancy's story the most, although there was something appallingly compelling about stepping into Diana's world. But boy, was I happy to step out of it!

**One of the big questions throughout the book is, to whom do we owe our loyalty. Do you think there is a way to remain loyal to someone without supporting their ideas and ambitions?**

Loyalty must have its limits, I think, particularly if remaining loyal to someone will put others—particularly large numbers of others—at risk of harm. Of course, we all have to draw our own lines around our loyalty to those individuals and institutions holding very different beliefs from our own and acting upon those beliefs. I think that, in *The Mitford Affair*, Diana crossed Nancy's line when her actions (and inaction) nearly killed Unity—and Nancy realized that many, many more people might be similarly impacted if Diana's plans reached fruition. But, of course, as the book posits, how well can we really know someone's beliefs and decisions?

**How certain do we have to be before we put aside our loyalty? What's next for you and your writing?**

I hope to continue excavating from the past the most important and fascinating women of history—women whose stories deserve to be told and legacies celebrated—until such novels are no longer necessary because both modern and historical women are no longer in the shadows.

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# MEET THE MITFORD SISTERS

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## NANCY MITFORD

Brilliant, witty, and occasionally scathing, the eldest of the aristocratic Mitford sisters was the original “Bright Young Thing” in British society in the interwar years. A wildly successful novelist and biographer, this green-eyed beauty, who sometimes inspired green-eyed envy in her sisters regardless of her unluckiness in love, was more than just an “it girl.” Her eccentric siblings seemed determined to put her loyalty to the test in the lead-up to World War II, ultimately forcing her to choose—her country or her family.

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## DIANA MITFORD

Oft-described as “the most beautiful girl” of her generation, this serene, sphinx-like Mitford sister started out on a conventional path when she married the heir to the Guinness beer fortune at the age of eighteen. But the straight and narrow could not hold her for long, and she soon became enamored of Sir Oswald Mosley and the political movement for which he advocated—fascism and then Nazism. How far would her passion take her?

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## UNITY MITFORD

Never one to allow a sister to trump her, Unity decided to one-up Diana's newfound fascination with fascism by moving to Germany and stopping at nothing to become part of Adolf Hitler's inner circle. This singular, peculiar "Valkyrie" of a Mitford sister embraced the Nazis with a rabid fervency until her beloved Germany declared war on her beloved England and Unity was faced with an impossible decision, leaving her sisters to fix her disastrous mistakes.

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## PAMELA MITFORD

Happiest tromping through the countryside with a coterie of animals, the quieter, practical Pamela was never one for the limelight, social or political, unlike the rest of her sisters. Still, never mind her reserved nature and seemingly steady married life, the lovely countrywoman managed to get swept up in her sisters' turmoil and desperate needs in the unlikeliest of scenarios as they became entangled in World War II.

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## DEBORAH MITFORD

The pretty, mild-mannered youngest Mitford sister fell in line with societal and familial expectations—and then exceeded them. Never tempted to follow in her sisters' extreme political footsteps, instead she soared to aristocratic heights, becoming the Duchess of Devonshire and embarking on a very different sort of adventure.

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## JESSICA MITFORD

Once inseparable from Unity, Jessica veered away from her closest sister's allegiance to fascism, choosing instead to align herself with the rising wave of communism. This whip-smart, headstrong younger Mitford girl marched to the beat of her own drummer, right across the continent and then the ocean as she pursued her beliefs—and her like-minded love. Would the divergence in political views drive a permanent wedge between the sisters?

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