

*The*  
BOOKSELLER'S  
SECRET

A Novel

MICHELLE GABLE



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ISBN-13: 978-1-525-80646-9

The Bookseller's Secret

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This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

Graydon House  
22 Adelaide St. West, 40th Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada  
[www.GraydonHouseBooks.com](http://www.GraydonHouseBooks.com)  
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# **THE MITFORD FAMILY**

## **THE PARENTS**

### **Lord Redesdale:**

David Freeman-Mitford, 2nd Baron Redesdale, “Farve”

### **Lady Redesdale:**

Sydney Bowles, “Muv”

## **THE SISTERS**

### **The Novelist:**

Nancy Freeman-Mitford (born 1904)

### **The Countrywoman:**

Pamela Freeman-Mitford (born 1907)

### **The Fascist:**

Diana, Lady Mosley (born 1910)

### **The Hitler Confidante:**

Unity Valkyrie Freeman-Mitford (born 1914)

### **The Communist:**

Jessica Lucy “Decca” Freeman-Mitford (born 1917)

### **The Duchess:**

Deborah “Debo” Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire  
(born 1920)

### **The Lone Brother:**

Thomas “Tom” David Freeman-Mitford (born 1909)

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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My interest in Nancy Mitford began twenty years ago, when I read *The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family* by Mary S. Lovell. How could I not be compelled by that band of girls? As my fictional Nancy says, “a Nazi, a Communist, and several Fascists in one family tree.”

*The Sisters* drew me into the Mitfords’ incredible world and soon I was reading everything I could about them. Of all the books I picked up, *The Pursuit of Love* was far and away my favorite. I felt an immediate kinship with the way Nancy wrote and thought about things. The book feels so thoroughly modern, it’s hard to believe it was written over seventy-five years ago.

Most biographies don’t explore Nancy’s years at the bookshop in great detail, making it a juicy area to mine for fiction. This part of her life is such a unique blend of the unimaginable (staying in London during the Blitz) and the relatable (Nancy doubting herself and her career), and shows Nancy Mitford at the precipice of stardom. When *The Pursuit of Love* was published in December 1945, it was every bit the success she dreamed, even though, or maybe because, the novel centered on a world that was disappearing.

In 1949, Nancy published the sequel, *Love in a Cold Climate*, in which Cousin Fanny narrates another family’s story. Next came *The Blessing* (1951), which many view as an at-

tempt to explain Nancy's enduring love affair with the Colonel. Five more books followed, including four biographies and one more novel—*Don't Tell Alfred* (1960), the final book in the Radlett trilogy.

Although Nancy Mitford wrote over eight thousand letters in her lifetime, there are yearlong gaps in the correspondence that has been made publicly available, including while she worked at Heywood Hill. It's in these gaps that I let my imagination run. Nancy did host refugees at Rutland Gate, including a pregnant sixteen-year-old, and some of these refugees went to her friend Lady Diana Worthington's home (renamed "Danette" in the novel), Weston Manor. Though Lady Worthington and her husband died in the ways described in the book, I don't know whether Nancy stayed in contact with the sixteen-year-old, or any other refugee. Lea and Emma are entirely fictional.

Nancy spoke often of writing her memoirs, but there's no evidence of a "missing manuscript" (though, as a fan, I'd like to imagine one exists). Throughout the book, I used snippets from Nancy's many letters to mimic her language and verve, though mostly I had her speak the words instead of writing them.

This is not a biography, and the point of a novel is to reflect the inherent truth of a situation, and not merely recite a list of facts. While the Nancy in my book does many things the real Nancy Mitford did not, I hope this novel is a reflection of the spectacular personality and wit of one of the most underrated authors of the twentieth century.

Below are real-life epilogues for several key characters.

## **NANCY (1904–1973)**

When Nancy returned to Paris for the second time, the move would prove permanent. With money in the bank, Nancy

settled in a flat on rue Bonaparte and, later, rue Monsieur. She would cite these as the happiest years of her life. In 1967, Nancy moved to Versailles, where she resided until her death.

In France, Nancy had a wide circle of friends, including intellectuals, artists, French nobility, and fellow English transplants. She relished her newfound fame and success, but this also made it more difficult to get rid of Prod. He refused a formal separation, and Nancy went on supporting him until 1957, when he finally agreed to a divorce.

One year before her death, the French government awarded Nancy with the Légion d'Honneur and the British government appointed her a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE). Evelyn had been offered a CBE at one time but considered it a grave insult and turned it down.

Nancy experienced the first signs of cancer in 1968, though her doctors and sisters hid the diagnosis until the end. Around the time Nancy began feeling ill, the Colonel married Helen-Violette de Talleyrand-Périgord, thereby ending their nearly three-decade long relationship. Nancy would go on to battle cancer for many years, finally succumbing in 1973, at sixty-eight years old, a young age for a Mitford. Tom and Unity predeceased Nancy, but the remaining Hons outlived her by twenty to forty years. Nancy's tombstone reads "Nancy Mitford, Authoress, wife of Peter Rodd."

## **THE COLONEL (1901–1984)**

Born into a Polish-Jewish family that settled in France, Gaston Palewski was educated at the École du Louvre, École Libre des Sciences Politiques, and the Sorbonne, with postgraduate studies at Oxford. His Air Force career proved his worth as a military man.

As in the book, the Colonel became General de Gaulle's *chef de cabinet* before ultimately resigning in January 1946,

when de Gaulle stepped down as head of the French Provisional Government. The Colonel would go on to hold many positions of importance, both elected and appointed, including vice president of the National Assembly, ambassador to Italy, and several posts within Prime Minister Georges Pompidou's cabinet.

The Colonel was awarded many French decorations in his lifetime, including the Légion d'Honneur. He married Helen-Violette de Talleyrand-Périgord, duchesse de Sagan, in 1969, and visited Nancy on the last day of her life.

Gaston Palewski died of leukemia in 1984, at the age of eighty-three.

### **PETER RODD (1904–1968)**

After Nancy moved to France, she still supported Prod, and he continued his longtime affair with Nancy's cousin, Adelaide Lubbock. Though he and Nancy were divorced for over ten years when he died, Peter's body was found in Malta with one of Nancy's letters clutched in his hand.

### **LADY HELEN DASHWOOD "HELLBAGS" (1899–1989)**

Despite my best efforts, I couldn't dig up much on Lady Helen Dashwood, otherwise known as "Hellbags." The details in the book, including her orgies, her nickname, and her reputation as "the most beautiful brunette in London," are true to what I uncovered about the spirited, fiercely intelligent woman. Lady Montdore in *Love in a Cold Climate* is based on Hellbags.

### **JIM LEES-MILNE (1908–1997)**

James Lees-Milne was instrumental in the transfer of country houses from private ownership to the National Trust, including Hellbags's West Wycombe. Dubbed by some as "the

man who saved England,” Jim was a prolific diarist and would go on to publish his journals along with many other books.

In 1951, Jim married Alvilde, Viscountess Chaplin, a prominent gardening and landscape expert. Both Jim and Alvilde were bisexual and she was said to have had affairs with many prominent women, including Eddy’s cousin Vita Sackville-West. Jim and Alvilde remained married until her death in 1994. Jim passed away several years later, at the age of eighty-nine.

### **EVELYN WAUGH (1903–1966)**

There is much to say about Nancy’s rival, mentor, and favorite correspondent. Waugh was a social climber. He was drunken, snobbish, and rude. He hated his own children and feared the end of aristocracy.

A late-in-life Catholic convert, the ever-grumpy Waugh became a literary star when his book *Brideshead Revisited* was published in 1945. He wrote nearly twenty novels in his lifetime.

Evelyn married twice, first to the Hon. Evelyn Gardner, otherwise known as She-Evelyn, the model for the “Bolter” character in *The Pursuit of Love*. He married Laura Herbert in 1937, and together they had seven children, six of whom survived infancy.

Like most, Nancy found Evelyn vexing, but it’s clear there was a deep love and respect between the two. When Nancy heard news of his passing on the French wireless, she was distraught. “Yes I’m in despair about Evelyn,” she wrote to Decca, “he was such a close friend & I suppose knew more about me than anybody.”

She added: “I’m burying my head in the sand & have bought a house in Versailles in which to moulder until I fall down dead as Debo’s children confidently expect me to at any minute.”



## **EDDY SACKVILLE-WEST (1901–1965)**

Edward Charles Sackville-West, 5th Baron Sackville, lived a life of angst. Though he understood he should be grateful for the privilege he was born into, he felt incapable of true joy on account of his delicate constitution and generally poor disposition. A devotee of the occult, Eddy was every bit the hypochondriac as portrayed by his alter ego, Uncle Davey, in *The Pursuit of Love*.

Eddy was a novelist, music critic, and member of the House of Lords. He also served on the board of the Royal Opera House. At the age of sixty-three, Eddy died suddenly of asthma-induced cardiac failure at his house in Ireland. Along with Evelyn, Eddy was one of the few people in Nancy's circle whom she outlived.

## **HEYWOOD HILL EMPLOYEES**

After a brief engagement to Jim Lees-Milne, Lady Anne Gathorne-Hardy married Heywood Hill in 1938. They would go on to have a second daughter in addition to Harriet, who was born during the war.

In the early nineties, Anne and Heywood sold their bookshop to Debo's husband, Andrew Cavendish, 11th Duke of Devonshire. Upon his death in 2004, his ownership passed to his son, Peregrine Andrew Morny Cavendish, 12th Duke of Devonshire, known as "Stoker." Heywood died in 1986, after a long battle with Parkinson's, and Anne lived on another twenty years, passing away in 2006 at the age of ninety-five.

Heywood hired Mollie Frieze-Green (or Friese-Green, the spelling varies) a bit later than my novel suggests. Though Mollie was single when hired, she'd eventually marry Handy, the new employee they took on at the end of the war.

## THE MITFORDS

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The bits I read made me think once again how ghastly all Mitfords *sound*, though of course in real life ha-ha they are ideal.

—Diana to Deborah, 11 August 1975

### **LORD (1878–1958) AND LADY (1880–1963) REDESDALE**

Though Muv and Farve never repaired their relationship, they also never formally divorced. Following Tom's death, Lord Redesdale retreated to Inchkenneth, before ultimately moving to Redesdale in Northumberland, the family's ancestral home. Having never fully recovered from Tom's death, Farve died a recluse at the age of eighty.

Lady Redesdale cared for her injured daughter until Unity's death in 1948 and resided at Inchkenneth after Farve left. In early 1963, Nancy, Debo, Diana, and Pamela gathered on the wretched island to care for their eighty-three-year-old mum in her final days. In true Sydney fashion, she was furious with her daughters for "dragging her back from the grave."

Nancy would famously say that, although she respected Muv, she did not love her, for the simple fact Sydney never loved her in return. About this, Nancy claimed no ill will and believed it was well within a woman's right to like or dislike her children.

### **PAMELA (1907–1994)**

Described as "relaxed and ordinary," Pamela was the rural Mitford, the sister who loved cooking, gardening, and animal husbandry. After the war, she and her husband, Derek Jackson, heir to the *News of the World* fortune, moved to Ireland as tax exiles. They divorced in 1951, after fifteen years of marriage,

and Pamela became instantly wealthy. Derek would marry a total of six times.

Following their divorce, Pamela began a longtime affair with an Italian horsewoman, Giuditta Tommasi. Decca described this as Pamela becoming a “you-know-what-bian.” Pamela died at the age of eighty-six due to a blood clot after a fall.

### **TOM (1909–1945)**

As in the book, Tom Mitford died after being shot in Burma and contracting pneumonia in a field hospital. He’d chosen fighting in the Pacific Theater because he had so many German friends.

By all accounts, Tom was smart, talented, and charming. Sheila Graham called him “one of the handsomest men I had ever seen.” Tom was the ultimate “Hon,” polite and courteous, and utterly comfortable in a house filled with girls. Despite this bright and sparkling façade, Tom had a dark side and endured many bouts of depression. It was said that nobody knew quite how he felt about anything.

### **DIANA (1910–2003)**

After Nancy’s death, Diana learned that her sister had reported her Fascist activities to the MI5 and Home Office at the war’s onset. This was a stunning revelation but later documents revealed Diana’s ex-father-in-law, Lord Moyne, also reported her “extremely dangerous character.”

Following the war, Diana and Oswald Mosley maintained homes in Ireland, London, and Paris. Though known for entertaining, they were banned from all functions at the British Embassy and denied passports until 1949. In France, they held a second marriage ceremony because Hitler had their original marriage license.

Diana published four books, including three that might

be described as “memoir” and one biography about Wallis Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor, a close friend. Diana died at age ninety-three, following a stroke. A diamond swastika was found among her personal effects.

### **UNITY (1914–1948)**

Unity was conceived at her parents’ gold prospecting claim in (ironically) Swastika, Ontario. Unity’s health never improved after her attempted suicide, and she remained incontinent and childlike until her death from pneumococcal meningitis at thirty-three. As the writer Jan Dalley said, “Unity found life in her big family very difficult because she came after these cleverer, prettier, more accomplished sisters.”

### **JESSICA (1917–1996)**

The hunger marches of the 1930s put young Decca on a path toward activism, and her *raison d’être* became to defeat Fascism at any cost.

Decca emigrated to the United States with her first husband in 1939, starting in Washington, DC, before ultimately moving to Oakland, California, where, as a young widow, she involved herself in left-wing politics. Decca trained people to organize at the California Labor School and was fiercely passionate about civil rights, which is how she met her second husband, attorney Robert Treuhaft. Treuhaft ran a “radical” law firm that would one day employ an intern named Hillary Rodham.

Decca left the American Communist Party in 1958. In 1963, she published her hit exposé *The American Way of Death* and would go on to write many other books. She became a minor celebrity and was close friends with Maya Angelou.

Decca was the only sister who drank heavily and smoked, and she succumbed to lung cancer in 1996. True to her beliefs, she had a plain, low-cost funeral and a burial at sea. Ten

years later, the writer J.K. Rowling would cite Jessica Mitford as “my most influential writer, without a doubt.”

## **DEBORAH (1920–2014)**

Debo’s husband became heir to the Duke of Devonshire when his older brother, who was married to Kick Kennedy, died in combat. Debo’s father-in-law passed in 1950, and her husband ascended to the dukedom, making Debo the Duchess of Devonshire. In their roles, she and Andrew received all the best invitations, from President Kennedy’s inauguration to the wedding of Charles and Diana.

Debo gave birth to seven children, only three of whom survived infancy. Her third-born child, Peregrine, inherited the Duke of Devonshire title and is the owner of the Heywood Hill bookshop.

Like many of her sisters, Debo wrote several books, and she helped turn Chatsworth House into one of Britain’s most successful stately homes. In 1999, she was appointed a Dame Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (DCVO) by Queen Elizabeth II, for her service to the Royal Collection Trust.

Debo died in 2014, at the age of ninety-four. It’s believed she was the last living Briton to have met Hitler.

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