

Fatal Purity



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Robespierre was only 36 when he died, sent to the guillotine where he had sent thousands ahead of him. Only a few months before, this pale and fragile man, formal, anxious to the point of paranoia, steeled by deep-held principles, had held centre place in the new Festival of the Supreme Being, wearing his sky-blue coat and decreeing a new religion for France. Robespierre and the Revolution were inseparable: a single inflexible tyrant. But what turned a shy young lawyer into the living embodiment of the Terror at its most violent? Admirers called him 'the great incorruptible'; critics dubbed him a 'monster', a 'bloodthirsty charlatan'; even his friends found him hard to understand. Ruth Scurr sheds a dazzling new light on this puzzle, tracing Robespierre's life from a troubled childhood in provincial Arras to the passionate idealist, fighting for the rights of the people, and sweeping on to the implacable leader prepared to sign the death warrant for his closest friends. No backdrop can match the French revolution: it burns with human interest. As Scurr says, "More than haunting, it obsesses, because it will not lie down and die". Her brilliant, probing narrative brings the Revolution and its chilling hero to fiery life once again, helping us to understand how ideals and fanaticism can so often go hand in hand, as they still do today.

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目录:

[Fatal Purity_下载链接1](#)

标签

历史

评论

[Fatal Purity_下载链接1](#)

书评

[Fatal Purity_下载链接1](#)