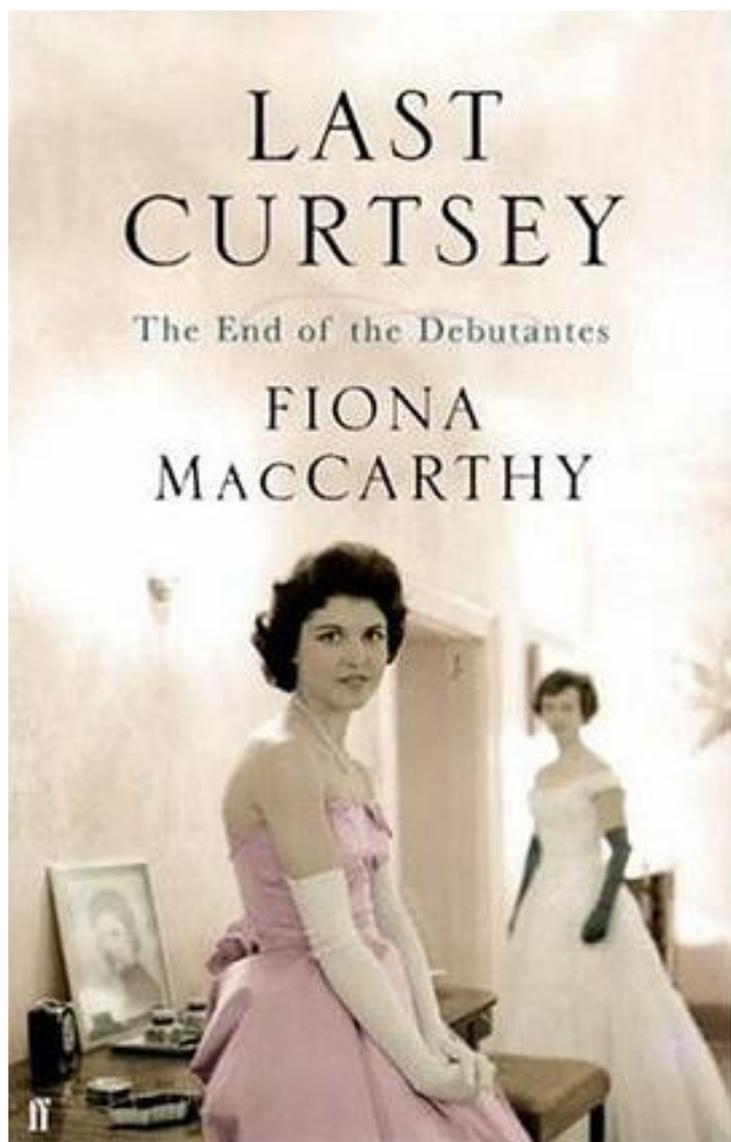


Last Curtsey



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著者:Fiona MacCarthy

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In 1958 - the year in which Krushchev came to power in Russia, the year after Eden's resignation over Suez, two years after John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger" - the last of the debutantes, myself among them, went to the Palace to curtsey to the Queen.' Fiona MacCarthy and her fellow 'debs' were taking part in one of the final rituals of aristocratic power. The system had been in operation almost unchanged since the eighteenth-century. It was a female rite of passage, an elaborate initiation ceremony marking the emergence of the virgin out of the schoolroom and into society at the marriageable age of seventeen. But that year, in 1958, it was drawing to a close. Under pressure to shine - not least from their mothers - the girls were somewhere between teenagers and clones of the Queen herself. Still the focus for newspaper diarists and society photographers, these young women participated in a party season stretching for months among the great houses of London and the Home Counties. Yet behind all the grandeur lay anxiety and making-do, as many families struggled to maintain the splendour of former times. Filtered through some of its most colourful and eccentric inhabitants, from Lady Caroline Lamb in the eighteenth-century to Princess Diana in the twentieth, "Last Curtsey" is a riveting portrait of Britain as both empire and the customs and certainties of the old order came to an end.

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