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NON-FICTION

## Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon 'The Season: A Social History of The Debutante'

December 17, 2019 Michael Giltz

"Young women have always been for sale." This eye-opening sentence begins chapter one of The Season, Kristen Richardson's serious, enlightening look at debutantes throughout history. It ranges over hundreds of years to explore the origin of why and how young women were presented at court in England and the ways this evolved into "the season" of balls and gatherings to introduce daughters of privilege into society. This book is not frothy.

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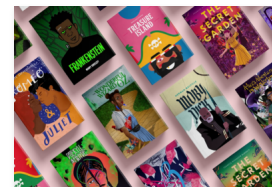


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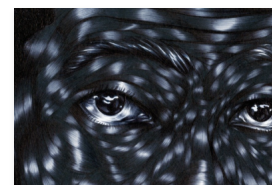
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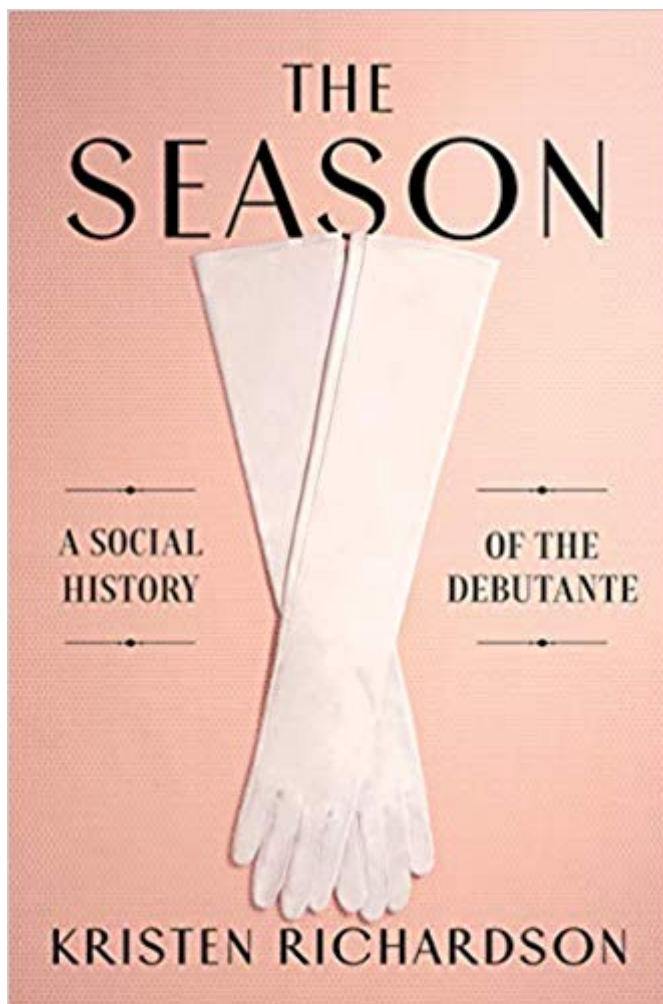
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Celebrating Black



Today the debutante season still matters to some. It offers continuity of tradition to some families, an insistence on respectability for the African American upper class and a canny act of self-promotion by the one-percent from China to the Middle East.

Richardson lays her (calling) cards on the table at the start. She laughed when her mother asked if the author wanted to debut. Indeed, they both laughed. But the history of the debutante is a significant slice of women's history and thus too many people easily dismiss it as unimportant.

She emphasizes the debutante as a relic of male control over women and the season an event that is by its nature controlling and narrow. But she also won't dismiss the women she speaks with who find this rite of passage meaningful or a source of communal pride.

Whether one thinks a debut is a lovely vestige of better times or an absurd relic, the young women at its heart are invariably beside the point for supporters or critics. But for Richardson, these cosseted and

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constrained women are very much the point. That's why she sees the phenomenon worthy of study and why her book is worth reading.

And young women *have* always been for sale. Richardson cites the historian Herodotus describing a yearly auction of Babylonian daughters to the highest bidder, not as slaves but as wives. A fine distinction, to be sure, but a distinction nonetheless. Rome did the same. Lest you see this as truly ancient history, the middle classes sold off their daughters at auction throughout most European countries during the Middle Ages.

## The Many Debutantes of Henry VIII

After that splash of cold water, Richardson gets to the heart of the matter. The debutante ball is all the fault of Henry VIII. He split from the Catholic Church so he could divorce his wife. But that meant Protestants lost the very useful tool of nunneries. Spare or troublesome daughters could always be stashed away in a convent. When those were no longer available to the aristocracy, they suddenly had a surfeit of eligible young ladies. As Mr. Bennett says of his five daughters in the Jane Austen novel *Pride and Prejudice*, "What's to be done with all these girls?"

The answer? They must be married. Hence the debut, in which families present young women ready for marriage to society under controlled circumstances. Lavish balls and an array of outfits reflect the wealth and privilege of the father, display the careful grooming of the bride-to-be, and offer the protection of keeping the tacky middle class and outright frauds at arm's length. Preferably they clothe that arm in a charming, long white glove with pearl buttons.

Richardson moves steadily through the ages. She covers the custom in England in the 1700s, its exporting to the American colonies by the 1800s, the differences in debuts between the North and South, the changing demands on women, the ever-shifting reasons the debut waxed and waned in importance, and, most recently, its adoption in China and the Middle East.

The closer we get to contemporary times, the less interesting Richardson becomes. Her gimlet eye is far-sighted, one imagines, and thus more piercing when it comes to the distant past. She is simply too polite to the debutantes of today.

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## The Riff-Raff Debuts

Before discretion overcomes her, Richardson proves how illuminating a look at “the season” can be. It’s astonishing how jumping to a new country or new century can reverse everything you think you know about this ritual. In England, the debut allowed the aristocracy to protect its turf and keep out the riff-raff. In America, it was used to *create* an aristocracy. This relative openness to riff-raff, newcomers with new money, made it weirdly democratic for a time.

The U.S. expected its debutantes to be polite, educated, and worldly. England viewed with horror any education beyond a little piano and sewing. When the American aristocracy became hidebound, the wealthy headed to Europe in search of a title. The cash-poor but house-rich nobility eagerly opened their doors.

Most eras would shame a debutante caught seeking publicity. They often sought it or even arranged it, but worked hard to appear astonished and miffed at the photographer or journalist who “slipped” in. Today, publicity is the entire purpose for many savvy young women building their personal brand.

In the past, some balls adopted charities as a fig leaf, a way to justify their extravagance. But African-American social circles saw college scholarships and the like as essential for giving back. For them, this genuine charitable work was crucial to the season and became a lifelong commitment.

Above all, Richardson focuses on the young women at the heart of it all. In some periods, young women longed to extend their debuts for as long as possible. And why not? It was the one time of their lives when they were free to have fun and enjoy a very little control over their lives. Later, a debut season was a tiresome convention girls got through as quickly as possible so they could get on with real life.

Whether the women are fretting over the rules or happily changing them, the season of a debutante is a fascinating window into the status of upper-class women and how much or little agency they have over their lives. Richardson reveals a rich and complicated world. One may wish it were a relic of the past. But since it reflects the male control over women, she’s surely right in saying the debut won’t be taking its last bow anytime soon.

(W.W. Norton and Company, November 19, 2019)

Tags: Kristen Richardson, Pride And Prejudice, The Season

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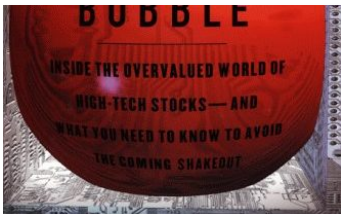
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### Michael Giltz

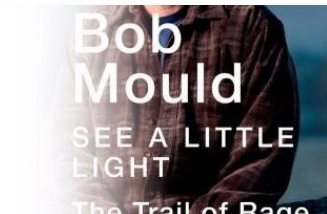
Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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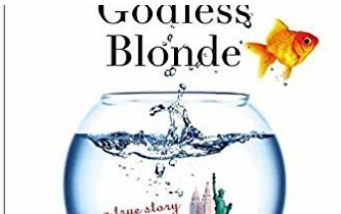
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