



## *Love Child*

*By Allegra Huston*

### Introduction

“This is your father.” With those words, Allegra Huston’s life changes forever: at age four, she joins the household of John Huston, acclaimed film director, actor, and estranged husband of Allegra’s mother, recently killed in a car accident. Allegra slowly adapts to the vastness of her father’s Irish estate, with its frenetic orbit of efficient servants, starstruck flatterers, and concerned caretakers of this timid little English girl.

Soon Allegra’s life shifts again: she becomes an American, first living with her grandparents on Long Island and then with her father and stepmother in Los Angeles. Then another short sentence changes everything: “You were a child of love.” Allegra meets her biological father, a British lord named John Julius Norwich, who was her mother’s lover during her strained marriage to John Huston.

Increasingly benumbed and confused about her origins, Allegra clings to her older sister, Anjelica Huston, a rising star in Hollywood. Anjelica spirits Allegra off to the lavish retreats of her two boyfriends, Jack Nicholson and Ryan O’Neal. As she grows up, Allegra quits Hollywood’s deceptive glamour and moves to London, where she slowly gets to know her biological father. Through her two fathers’ memories and her mother’s correspondence, Allegra finally finds the mother she barely remembers, discovering touching parallels between a daughter’s life and a mother’s hopes and dreams.



## Discussion Questions:

1. *Love Child* begins with two dramatic scenes from Allegra Huston's childhood: learning of her mother's death and meeting John Huston in a smoky hotel room. What emotions are conjured up in these two opening scenes? What role does memory play within each scene?
2. Allegra describes several episodes of gift-giving: the bicycle she received at St. Cleran's, the belt Cici made for her new husband, Allegra's beach glass picture, and "Moby John," the Styrofoam whale that Allegra and Danny improvised for their father. What expectations, disappointments, and other emotions seem to be wrapped up within each of these gifts?
3. What does Allegra learn about her mother's life, her marriage, and her dreams from reading her old letters? How is she able to piece together a relationship with her mother through reading and writing?
4. "I felt, in myself, bog-ordinary. My skin itself was tired by my chameleon life." (90) What does Allegra mean by her "chameleon life?" What toll does it take upon her mood, her aspirations, and her relationships? In the end, does Allegra seem "bog-ordinary" in her memoir? Why or why not?
5. Consider each home in which Allegra spends her childhood: Maida Avenue in London, St. Cleran's in Galway, her grandparents' Long Island home, Uncle Myron and Aunt Dorothy's

“Gloom Castle,” the Euclid Street rental in Los Angeles, Cici’s light-filled house, Jack Nicholson’s hillside home, Ryan O’Neal’s Malibu beach house, and Allegra’s stay in a London flat during the making of *The Shining*. What does Allegra’s description of each home reveal about its owners? In which of these houses does Allegra seem most—and least—at home?

6. Compare the two scenes in which Allegra meets her fathers: first as a young child in London, then as an adolescent in Los Angeles. How does Allegra react differently to each meeting? What expectations—and disappointments—does Allegra bring to her first encounter with John Julius Norwich? How are they able to formulate a unique relationship, what she calls “a closeness without a name”? (245)
7. Allegra meets many strong male personalities in *Love Child*. What comparisons does she make between John Huston and the other kinglike men in her life—Grampa, Jack Nicholson, Ryan O’Neal, and John Julius Norwich?
8. Throughout her memoir, Allegra worries that she doesn’t have “ownership rights” to her identity, and particularly to her relationship with the mother she barely remembers (152). How does this anxiety of ownership reveal itself in her memoir? With whom does Allegra feel she has to compete for ownership over her parents? How does she resolve this conflict?
9. Revisit the photographs at the center of the book. What story does each photo tell? What do these images add to the experience of reading *Love Child* and which relationships especially come to life within these family portraits?
10. Although Allegra grew up in a very glamorous world, many of the experiences, emotions, and uncertainties she expresses are common among ordinary families. Additionally, she forged loving bonds with “family members” who weren’t blood relations, as with her brother Danny. What scenes in *Love Child* were you especially able to relate to?

## Enhance Your Book Club:

1. Host a movie screening for your book club! Let your book club members vote on which of John Huston's movies to watch together: *Prizzi's Honor* (starring Anjelica Huston and Jack Nicholson), *Annie*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Night of the Iguana*, *The Misfits* or his last movie, *The Dead*. Watch *Chinatown* to see John Huston and Jack Nicholson light up the screen together; *The African Queen*, Huston's most popular film, starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn; *The Man Who Would Be King*; or *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.
2. One theme in *Love Child* is the uncertainty of memory. Ask your book club members to bring a childhood photograph to your meeting. Have each member explain the photograph and discuss what he or she remembers and doesn't remember from the day it was taken.
3. During your book club meeting play songs by Bob Dylan, Allegra and Anjelica's favorite singer in *Love Child*. Sing along to "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," like the sisters used to!
4. Visit Allegra Huston's website, [www.allegrahuston.com](http://www.allegrahuston.com), to read more of her writing, including the original *Harper's Bazaar UK* article that inspired *Love Child*.
5. Visit [losriosriverrunners.com](http://losriosriverrunners.com) and see photos of the Rio Grande Gorge, where the christening of Allegra's son Rafa took place, and get a taste of Allegra's life in New Mexico.



## Author Questions:

**Tell us how you came to write *Love Child*. How did you decide to write your story, and what shape did it originally take?**

Someone asked me recently, “How long did it take to write *Love Child*?” “Two years,” I said. Then he asked, “How long did it take to get up the courage to write it?” That made me laugh, it was so unexpectedly perceptive. I made a guess: ten years.

The idea of writing a memoir lay at the back of my mind for a long time, but I didn’t really let it come out until after I wrote “Daddies’ Girl” for *Harpers Bazaar UK*—and I wrote that because I woke up one morning wanting to write about how lucky I feel to have the family I have, though a stranger might pity someone with my history. I’d never wanted to write something that would come across as “poor me,” but I did want to tell my story honestly, because I thought it might give courage to people in similar situations. The day I realized I had a happy ending for it—my son’s christening, when all my family came together—was the day I knew I’d write the book.

**The dubiousness of memory—particularly what you can and cannot remember about your mother—is a strong theme in your memoir. How were you able to channel those few memories of your mother? Did those memories come to the page naturally, or did you find them difficult to access?**

I had always had my little trove of memories from the time before Mum died. I knew them well, they seemed secure—and the fact that I had them gave me courage to attempt to write a memoir. I thought

it would be easy to write them down, but it wasn't at all. Suddenly I wasn't sure of details I'd always been sure of; things didn't add up; I started embellishing because the memories seemed so thin, but everything I wrote was dead on the page. I panicked. I thought, how did I get a contract to write a memoir when I can't bloody remember anything? But I was settled in at my favorite coffee shop, curled on a sofa by the window, and I couldn't give up, so I did an Imaginative Storm exercise: I wrote for ten minutes about what I couldn't remember. That freed me from having to be exact. I realized that the book was not supposed to be an accurate record of trivial events—this wasn't the Cuban Missile Crisis! I hoped that if I was honest and didn't try to gloss over the gaps and contradictions, readers might find connections with their own memories.

**Please tell us more about finding and reading your mother's correspondence, which feels so crucial to the memoir. Do you think you could have written *Love Child* without drawing upon her letters?**

Even though *Love Child* arose from an article about my two fathers, I knew that my mother and her story were central to it. Ten years ago, I had thought about writing a book “in search of my mother.” I would certainly have written *Love Child* even if I hadn't had Mum's letters, but it would have been impoverished; it would have been “all about me,” and I wanted it to be about Mum, too. I wanted to come to know her, and I also wanted to memorialize her so that she wouldn't be forgotten in Dad's shadow. I didn't know that Mum's letters to John Julius existed when I decided to write the book—and they are, for me, the book's heart. I was very disappointed when I wasn't able to dig up more letters that she had written to her family and friends, but I think in the end the one-sidedness of each correspondence proved to be a bonus. I couldn't be an objective observer of the back-and-forth, like someone watching a tennis match; I was plunged into the subjective experience of either receiving or writing the letters.

**Your memoir has so many moments of doubting your creativity as a child—and yet now you have written an acclaimed memoir!**

**How do you reconcile the tentativeness of your youth with your adult accomplishments? Do any of those childhood uncertainties persist?**

You bet they do! I've started another book, and it's like reinventing the wheel. I have no idea if I can do this. I look at *Love Child* and it's as if it was written by someone else—someone who knew what she was doing. I have to remind myself that when I was writing it, I felt like I didn't know what I was doing then either. I'll always be the kind of person who doubts myself; I am fascinated by and sometimes yearn to be one of those confident people who think they can do anything but I never will be (and the truth is, that mindset can get you killed). I just have to keep putting the doubts to one side and taking things one step at a time. I tell myself the least I can do is try, and I'll find out later whether it's any good or not. The end—a good book—is so far away it's out of sight.

**As you wrote in your memoir, Anjelica heard your father's voice while trying to plan his funeral: "Rise above it. You know how he always used to say that? 'Rise above it'" (266). Were you able to put your father's motto to use while writing *Love Child*? Was there anything you have had to "rise above" in writing your family's story?**

I think "Rise above it" is a very good motto for living generally. Don't waste time on what's not important. Don't get sucked into the drama. Get on with it: don't dwell on the past. Be a big person; be generous of spirit; be the person you'd admire. I think our whole family has had to do a fair bit of "rising above" the complications Dad left us, as well as the difficulties that beset us all by virtue of the fact that we're human: family dynamics, cruel circumstances, disappointments and crushed hopes, clashing needs and agendas. I, personally, have had to rise above my feelings of inferiority to my sister Anjelica, not to mention feeling sorry for myself because I lost my mother so young. I try to say to myself, when I'm angry or depressed over something, "How can this be a good thing?" Or if not that, what am I grateful for? I'm lucky that I live in a very beautiful place, so if all else fails I can look

up at the mountains or west across the vast horizons, which remind me of the ocean. Stars and moon are good too.

**Your memoir chronicles so many moves from country to country, and the evolving national identity you cultivated as a child and as an adult. How do you view your nationality now? Do you see yourself as belonging to many countries, or primarily to one?**

I see myself as part English and part American, with a dash of Irish thrown in, and a pinch of Italian from my mother's ancestry. Because I had three different accents as a child my voice tends to change according to what country I'm in. The American never vanishes, but I still say "cahn't" even at home, and once in Ireland someone said to me, "You sound like you never left!" When I was living in England as an adult, I always felt American there and English whenever I was in the United States. Now that I've lived back in the United States for eleven years and have a family here and an investment in the local culture of Taos, I feel more American. Still, one of my goals is to establish a pocket of British slang in northern New Mexico, so that in a hundred years linguists will puzzle over people saying things like, "Ee, ese, I'm knackered."

**The last scene of the book—when all sides of your family came together for Rafa's christening—makes for a very moving conclusion. Do you see this event as the climax of your search for family and belonging?**

Yes, I do. I didn't at the time, of course, but when it came to thinking about a book and the shape of my life, that fantastic event was the natural climax. Moments like that are fleeting, but the fact that they happen is enough. Memory makes them eternal (and photos help). The search doesn't actually end until you die, so Rafa's christening was the climax only to that particular strand of my story. It's the beginning of another story one.

***Love Child* ends, "I feel closest to Mum not in my memory, but in that photograph taken on Maida Avenue, where I'm holding her hand" (286). What details in that photograph stand out for you? Why is it so special for you?**

It's special because it's the last photo, taken only weeks before Mum

died. Maybe less. The way she's looking back over her shoulder; the way I'm walking on ahead, regardless. The fact that she's holding my hand. If she hadn't died, those details wouldn't be so charged with meaning. It's also the only photo that exists of the two of us where I'm a conscious person, not a newborn baby. That's important to me—it proves, somehow, that I did actually know her.

**In your acknowledgments, you thank Anjelica Huston for providing the title *Love Child*. Did you have any reservations about showing your work to family members? Did they show any hesitation in supporting your decision to write about the family?**

As I wrote in the Acknowledgments, the only hesitation any of my family showed was that pause before Anjel said, "Be kind." I had no agenda for revenge or "justice" when I wrote the book, so I knew I would be kind—but I would also be honest, as scrupulously honest as I could. I worried most about Anjel, Cici, and John Julius, because I knew some of their actions would be open to ungenerous interpretations, but the only way to protect them from that would be not to tell the story at all. I felt that the value of telling the story outweighed the risk and that if I told it with love and understanding and lack of judgment, maybe that would encourage readers to suspend judgment, too—and not just about members of my family. Very often, people are just doing the best they can in tough circumstances.

Of course I was nervous when I finally sent the manuscript to everyone, even though I'd gone through it specifically looking for anything I thought might offend or hurt someone needlessly. I sent it to them all at the same time, in the same e-mail. Fortunately they all loved it and are supporting it 100 percent. The very few corrections they asked for were minor and factual.

**Now that you have written the story of your life so far, what is the next unwritten chapter, the next challenge to embrace?**

I'm superstitious about talking about things before they happen, so I don't want to say anything beyond that I'm working on another book. The greatest challenge of all is raising my son to be a confident, generous, engaged, happy person.