

Love Child

A Memoir of Family Lost And Found

At four, Allegra Huston was a precocious, “proper little English girl,” growing up in a comfortable London home with her adored Mum, her older siblings Anjelica and Tony and Nurse, her Irish nanny. This seemingly idyllic life—even without the requisite daddy—was shattered by the death of her mother in a freak automobile accident. From that day until late adolescence, the orphaned daughter became an involuntary nomad, shuttled across a continent and a country as a temporary guest in other people’s homes.

LOVE CHILD: A Memoir of Family Lost and Found (Simon & Schuster; April 7, 2009; \$26.95), is the author’s poignant and exquisitely rendered chronicle of her radically altered young life and her struggle to recover the essence of a mother whose reality faded by the day. That longed-for mother, the extraordinarily beautiful Ricki Soma, had been a celebrated dancer with the New York City Ballet and at her death was the estranged fourth wife of the brilliant, eccentric and notoriously womanizing filmmaker John Huston.

After her mother’s death, Allegra was led into a hotel room and introduced to Huston with the words, “This is your father.” She was whisked away to St. Clerans, Huston’s magnificent estate in Ireland—where, during his infrequent visits, she dared do little more than watch him paint. After three years, she was sent to the Long Island home of her maternal grandparents, and then, a year later, on to the posh enclaves of Southern California where she took up temporary residence with—among others—her father’s soon-to-be-divorced fifth wife, Cici; the legendary Helena Kallianiotis, who launched the roller-skating craze of 80s’ Hollywood with Allegra at her side; her glamorous sister, Anjelica, already a famous actress and live-in partner of the larger-than-life Jack Nicholson; and, following their breakup, a wretched stay with an unhappy Anjelica in the ocean-front Malibu digs of perpetually coke-snorting and violent-tempered Ryan O’Neal.

Allegra’s is the penetrating gaze of an outsider, yet she developed a chameleon’s skin, fitting into each new home as occasion required. As she writes, about her “exile” from St. Cleran’s, “I wasn’t unhappy with the change. Other people had been found to look after me, and nobody seemed to think I would have any feelings about it at all—so, conveniently, I didn’t.”

At the age of twelve Allegra weathered yet another blow, when her stepmother revealed that her biological father was not John Huston but a titled British historian, John Julius Norwich (who had, like Ricki, been married to someone else at the time of their love affair)—and welcomed him for an awkward visit. The revelation put even more pressure on Allegra, whose allegiances were already stretched thin. “My family bonds,” she writes, “were like wires stretched around the curved surface of the earth, pulled so very tight they were liable to snap—and me with them. John Julius was yet another claim on me ... another hook in my flesh.”

That unwelcome bond would, in time, become close and enduring, as John Julius welcomed her into her new family. He gave Allegra another gift: a massive pack of letters that her mother had written to him. Allegra describes the joy and anguish of reading them: feeling again, and more bitterly, the pain of her loss, yet finally hearing the voice of the mother she had yearned to know for so many years. In her letters—full of passion, sweetness, electric sensitivity and quiet rage—Ricki reveals her passionate love for John Julius, her exasperated affection for Huston and their tempestuous relationship, and above all, her happiness at the fact of Allegra’s appearance in her life.

Allegra weaves the romantic struggle of her mother’s short life into her own story, a parallel though different search for love. She shares with readers her efforts to forge an identity that can encompass both these powerful, famous fathers. When people asked casual questions about her family, she was hamstrung, she writes: “Whatever I said, I felt I was lying.” For many years, until the heart-wrenching last months of Huston’s life, she “lived in two different families as two separate selves.” She developed her own shorthand for referring to them: John Julius Norwich was her father, John Huston was her dad.

For all her childhood loneliness, Allegra ends her extraordinary memoir on a note of triumph: the joyous gathering of all her siblings, and her father too, for the unusual and entertaining christening of her son in the Rio Grande. As she writes, at last: “I didn’t have to do anything, be anything in particular: just me, just there, a daughter and a sister, and now a mother too.” This wealth of family is, she realizes, the hard-won blessing of her mother’s legacy to her.

LOVE CHILD is a beautifully written, forensically honest story of a motherless and tumultuous childhood; an entry into the private realms of Hollywood’s biggest stars; and a moving meditation on loss and memory. Ultimately, it reveals the sensitivity, courage and determination of a woman who managed, against the odds, to make her own

unique family out of the fragments that a sudden death left behind. It speaks to all who have found themselves adrift and uncertain of their place, all who face explosive secrets, all who strive to balance the conflicting loyalties of a broken family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allegra Huston, was born in London and raised in Ireland, Long Island, and Los Angeles. She has worked at Chatto & Windus publishers in London, and Weidenfeld & Nicolson where she was editorial director from 1990 to 1994. A freelance writer and editor for over ten years, her work has appeared in the *London Times*, the *Independent*, the UK edition of *Harper's Bazaar* and French *Vogue*. Her work has also appeared in the U.S. in *People*, the *Santa Fean*, and *Mothering*. She is co-director of The Writing Salon, a workshop retreat for writers, and lives in Taos, New Mexico, with her son, Rafael, and his father, whitewater rafter Cisco Guevara.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Title: LOVE CHILD: A Memoir of Family Lost and Found

Author: Allegra Huston

Publisher: Simon & Schuster

Publication date: April 7, 2009

ISBN-10: 1-4165-5157-3; ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-5157-7

Price: \$26.95

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