



Family Romance: A Love Story

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A memoir by the acclaimed novelist *The Wall Street Journal* called "blessed with a sense of history, a feeling for place, an observant eye for detail, and an elegant no-frills style."

In their particulars, the Lanchesters were not Every Family. The father was an international banker, the mother a former nun. Yet in the dynamic of family life, their patterns are instantly recognizable. The heart of that dynamic is a built-in tug-of-war: to a young child, a sense of loving protection becomes, as he matures, a set of barriers to be overcome. In his richly told story, John Lanchester brings this dynamic to life, and in the process makes us think about our own family story and about the legacy-emotional, social, intellectual-our parents pass on to us, generation to generation, the bitter with the best.

It was only when his mother died that Lanchester realized how little he really knew his parents. That, too, is in the nature of families: parents keep secrets from their children, and children are happy to acquiesce, not wanting to disturb their universe. But with Julie Lanchester's death-and the cache of papers and letters she left behind-Lanchester set out to reconstruct just who his parents had been. In doing so, he gained extraordinary insight into his own nature, and a deeper understanding of theirs. And because he has the wisdom to see the universal aspects of his story, *Family Romance* resonates for anyone who has ever felt the push-pull of family love.

Part detective work, part remarkable evocation of character, *Family Romance* is, above all, compelling storytelling.

Family Romance: A Love Story Details

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Elizabeth says

It was only when his mother died that Lanchester realized how little he really knew his parents. But with Julie Lanchester's death-and the cache of papers and letters she left behind-Lanchester set out to reconstruct just who his parents had been.

This book resonated with me on many levels. I was brought up Catholic. My mother, a British colonial, had a hidden past, not necessarily filled with secrets like this author's mother, but alien to me in many ways as I was an American girl and she was brought up in Gibraltar. I've spent the last few years researching her childhood and life in London during the war. But in the end, I think I learned more about how NOT to write a memoir about my parents as I felt pushed away by the author's voice. Too much telling and analyzing and not enough direct experience of the story, a hard thing to do when you're writing about people, places and times you never knew while at the same time, hampered by having to stick to the actual facts of these two people's lives. Add to that that they are your parents who, even though they are dead, would probably heartily disapprove of being exposed in this way and as the author, you keep shying away from the tough stuff. At least I have, and I think Lanchester has too, by over intellectualizing. Reading him helped me to turn the spotlight around and focus on my own childhood first and then look at what about my parents' history made them the parents they became.

Jenn says

The depth of thought and care in this book in terms of how the author muses on the impact of the stories he's telling, both on himself (bookending the parents' stories) and on his parents, is - startlingly luminous. The first chapter's writing is just a little twee but a good twee - the storyteller weight to it rather than some ironic twisty bit.

So ultimately this book felt a bit personal: He reflects a lot on the impact of his mother's (hidden) life as a nun, and the lie she told in order to marry his father (changed her age and took on her sister's legal identity; thus she had to keep away from her family). There's also some neat bits around the end of the British Empire.

It did drag a bit around his father's story; it felt like he was trying to give it equal weight, to be fair, when really it was less of a story.

This was a random library select and really fortuitous.

Katherine says

I read this because I loved "Capital" by this author.

Interesting family dynamics to say the least, and they lived in several different countries as John was growing up. Mother was first a nun, for many years, and this haunted the rest of her life - she was definitely the focus of the book.

Danielle McClellan says

John Lanchester is one of those authors that I keep forgetting that I love. Every one of his books is like a fresh, delightful new voice in my head and then I remember that I have admired his work before. Part of the reason for this may be because each of his books is quite different. I still recommend *The Debt to Pleasure* often as though it came out yesterday rather than 15 years ago. It is a sly and witty mystery about a cookbook writer who is not quite what he seems.

Family Romance is a smart memoir about a complex set of parents. Lanchester discovers his mother's past after her death and spends the book unraveling the person that she was from the person that he thought he knew. Absolutely filled with witty, observant asides about the choices that we make in life. I just loved this book on so many different levels. My poor husband had to listen to me read paragraphs aloud at least ten times, and that is a rare enough occasion to distinguish the book as a new favorite.

Caren says

This is a beautifully written, absorbing account of the author's parents' very unusual lives. After both parents had died, the author, an only child, went in search of their stories and uncovered some startling secrets. His mother had spent her youth as a nun, only leaving the convent barely in time to have a child: the author. His father's childhood was interrupted by World War II, when he was evacuated from Hong Kong to Australia, separated from his parents for the entire war. After the war, and after university, the author's father became a banker, living in many different parts of the world. How his parents met and married is kind of amazing. This is a lovely, lyrical tale of one "family romance".

Jeanette says

John Lanchester describes *Family Romance* as a memoir, but I found it more of a biography of a family. Much of the information in this book was not things he remembered, but information that he had found through extensive research, particularly on his mother. The part of the book that was most interesting were the sections on his mother's story and how she had kept secrets from him and his father. The book begins with his mother's death and ends with what he has chosen to put on her grave stone after his research of her life. He tells the reader at the beginning of the book that he felt guilty for having his mother cremated when he read her instructions asking to be buried in a casket. He hadn't read these instructions until after the cremation. This information is foreshadowing the story of his mother and her secrets. This book seems to really be his mother's story.

The sections on his father I found far less interesting and I felt the section at the end about his own struggle with anxiety detracted from the book. He seemed to be trying to give both of his parents equal time in the book and then as their only child his own life story. I found the sections on his father confusing at times. Although John Lanchester is an excellent writer and the book is well written, I think the real story he wanted to tell was the one of his mother. I would like to ask him why he chose to write the book about his family rather than about his mother.

Kathryne says

The author's insights are remarkable. Anyone who has ever experienced agoraphobia, acute anxiety, panic or depression will enjoy his explanation of these very real episodes. And that he thinks medication dampens a writer's talents is probably accurate. I learned a lot about a nun's existence and enjoyed visualizing the many exotic locations. Why only two stars the? It dragged on and on.

Pip says

Brilliant, very moving.

Rachel says

A gentle and complex memoir that traces Lanchester's attempt to wrestle with the secrets, half-truths and lies his parents told in order to maintain their English respectability and their pride. Unlike Jeanette Winterson's dramatic life-story of abuse, Lanchester's story has plenty of surprises and twists, but remains utterly and poignantly ordinary. I admired his bravery in exploring a hurtful legacy of repression and secrecy and his reluctance to judge. As a parent himself, he eventually begins to accept his own parents' foibles, but not before he is exasperated by them. The style of this memoir is obviously very different to the flamboyance of his novels, but it helps you to understand the life experiences and places he draws on in his fiction and it made me admire one of my favourite authors even more.

Basia Korzeniowska says

A beautiful book, extremely well researched and told with such love.

Ernie says

I was surprised to find that Lanchester, whose writing I have long admired from his contributions to The London Review of Books and his satirical novel *The Debt to Pleasure* had written a family history or memoir. Then, as I read, I found it was all about the secret life his mother had led and how he had never known that she had been a nun, which is when I remembered the piece he had written for the London Review some years back about how his mother resigned as a nun in India and how difficult it had been for her to travel back to London and the poignant details about her anxiety about her hair and getting a change of clothing as soon as possible after the plane had landed. However, her son had never known this until after the death of both his parents when, sorting out her papers, he was able, with the help of his aunt, to follow the trail of clues and reconstruct the surprising story of her secret life. She had been a nun, twice. This gradually was revealed to him through his research. He organises his text like a detective story writer but it is distinguished by the love he felt for his mother and the anger he felt towards her parents and those in the

church who had not supported her.

She was born in a small town in Ireland where her impoverished parents were the proud possessors of a son who became a priest and Julia who became a nun. Symbolically, when she did not take her final vows and returned home in 1938, there was nothing to wear but the cut down remnant of her black postulant's dress, "a deliberate piece of public shaming that Julia never forgot or forgave". Lanchester sees how this permanently affected his mother's character. She became hard, "she would not be a supplicant; she would not admit to needing anything or anyone...from now on she was always the one who did the rejecting." In an instant, the family heroine became the "family disgrace".

Lanchester writes, "I wish she had had the chance to tell me the whole story, start to finish, and to see how outraged it made me feel on her behalf. I wish she had trusted me, and herself, enough. But, I'm sorry to say, to wish that, is at least partly to wish that my mother was somebody else." And this is the clue to me about his role in the telling of the remarkable series of secrets that he reveals. His mother became a nun again and was a successful principal of a Catholic school in India before she renounced her vows after 14 years. Even more secrets are revealed about her courtship and marriage and the keeping of the secret by her sister.

To Lanchester's credit and this makes the book more honest and interesting for me, he realises his part in the tensions that must have affected his relationship with both his father and mother as an only child of a woman who suffered numerous miscarriages. "I know, because I was told, that to my parents I had become a tyrannical monster of sarcasm, silence, eye-rolling, parent-despising, moral superiority, boredom and argumentative radical politics." And there is another admission from him that "writing and therapy are linked, because they are both about a search for meaning." Near the end, he quotes Edmund White: "Family life binds strangers together."

In researching and writing this story, he finally found some of those parts of his mother's character that he had never known and that, like her, he wanted to become a writer and now he could. A Debt to Pleasure had sat in his desk drawer for years and now he was able to rewrite it and find a publisher.

Joshua says

never-boring memoir of the author's mother. frank introspection too.

Sue Perry says

Started listening to this as an audiobook. In fact I started it several times, and kept going for several chapters, but couldn't get into it. The story was so dull. The narrator's monotonous and slow reading of the book didn't help.

Jack O'Donnell says

This is a triptych of father, mother, son and ghosts of life. And his parents die in that order. Father, Bill, first, unexpectedly of a heart attack not long after retiring from banking. Then mother, Julie, unravelled by strokes until there was nothing left. This is where the story begins and ends, because it allows John, their only son to bind himself closer, and find out more about their earlier life. His life too comes under scrutiny, but it is also

a meditation on truth and lies, and how we construct the characters we become and how they inhabit our own lives.

Lanchester suggests that ‘very few things in life are a revelation’, but his mother’s secret life, the longest and most compelling part of the book, must have come as a shock. He comes to the conclusion that if his mother ‘had not lied, I would never have been born’. In other words if it hadn’t happened, he couldn’t have made it up.

‘Julie Lanchester, who died on 6th August 1998, aged 77 years’ had shaved ten years off her age. Her father Bill when he got engaged and married her (she was already pregnant with son John) believed most of his life until his death at 57 that his wife Julie was ten years younger than she was. That when he married her, she was thirty-years old and not forty. Bill, as an only child, with knowledge of all that entailed, wanted to go on to have lots more little Lanchesters; something she also wanted. John, their only child, later found out his mother had suffered four miscarriages. But suffering was something Julie was practiced in.

Bill had no reason to disbelieve that his wife’s name Julie was also a lie. She was born Julia Gunnigan was born on 5th December 1920 in Lurgan, Ireland. Her father Pat was a subsistence farmer and her mother Molly (Mary) was the wife of a subsistence farmer with the family wed to the land. This was most graphically shown at the age of sixteen when Julia, a postulant nun, returned home from Sister of The Good Shepherd (made infamous by Peter Mullan, *The Magdalene Sisters*) to convalesce and decided not to go back or take her final vows. Her father and mother punished her by ignoring her and sending her to Coventry, but until an Uncle found her an escape route, she remained in the religious garb of the novitiate. Part of the reason for this was economical. She had by that time five other younger sisters. Four of whom also became nuns. And there was literally no money, but they could scrape enough to eat. But there seemed also to be something of the branding of the one that disgraced the family, the equivalent of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlett Letter*. And this experience John believed helped mark his mother for life. But perhaps more surprising is after a man she was engaged to in a sanatorium died of tuberculosis, which she also contracted whilst working there as a nurse, at the age of twenty-six, she joined another order of nuns, the Presentation Sisters in nearby Lurgan. She took the name Sister Eucharia and after taking holy orders was able to get herself sent to Madras in India, which she ran as head teacher of a Catholic school attended by the up-and-coming classes in that region.

John knew nothing of this part of his mother’s life, and was surprised to discover he had Catholic relations. But he comes to the conclusion: ‘some of the most important things that can happen to people can happen before they are born.’ This sounds decidedly to me like the importance of money and wealth and good connections – something Lanchester went to write extensively about for example *How to Speak Money*, and his recent television drama series on BBC 1 based on his book *Capital*. His father was a living example, a man who found his work boring and repetitive, but like many other ‘found it impossible to give up money’ and the need for financial security, ‘where money is concerned, [there’s] no such thing as enough’, something he’d learned from his own father. The boarding school John was sent to as a ten-year old, before taking a First at Oxford in English, was decidedly Anglo-Protestant. But Julia/Julie his mother had an almost preternatural way of hiding things she didn’t want to talk about or confront. ‘Julie wanted to be her own crypt’. And his father Bill, although an international banker, travelling the world, also didn’t like confrontation. In many ways they were made for each other.

Julia Immaculata Gunnigan became Bridget Teresa Julia Gunnigan, or on her passport B.T.J Gunnigan before her marriage by applying for her younger sister Dilly’s birth certificate and getting an Irish passport issued in her new name. This is very John Le Carre, where I think I first read about this trick. But then after marriage B.T.J Gunnigan become B.T.J. Lanchester. Julia/Julie felt she had to cut all ties with her family in

case this lie became revealed. But B.T.J. Lanchester's ability to compartmentalise her life had other costs. As Count Pierre Bezukhov comes to conclude in War and Peace, in order to be happy we must have the ability to imagine happiness, John's mother had the ability to imagine she was not there and her son noted this absence whilst she was present. 'Ways in which as a child my mother wasn't fully present'.

The psychic cost was something he became familiar with. After his mother and father's death he suffered from panic attacks. But that's too bland a description. 'I couldn't breathe, let alone see straight or think straight. I felt as if my mind broke. I wasn't just going to die, I had disintegrated.'

The remaining death in the family was his mother Julie/Julia's career as a writer. She had published a short story 'Minding Mother Margaret', about a young nun taking care of an older nun that is nearing death, which was broadcast by BBC radio, and the story is reproduced in her son's book. But Julie/Julia had published it under the pseudonym Shivaun Cunningham. But after marriage Julie covered her tracks so effectively that she never alluded to that time and never wrote again. Her son mourns that great loss. In the words of Virginia Woolf, she had the time and the space, a room of her own, but as keeper of a secret identity left no wiggle room. John Lanchester, of course, was their reason for being and he has successfully picked up that baton. 'Language is an intimate betrayal.'

Seanán Mac says

"Have you read the book?" Was one question going around my grandmother's funeral, the book was considered not a good thing and when my father bought it I assumed it was to be some daft piece of mediocre sentimentality. Turns out I was wrong!

to clarify this book is about Lanchester's revelation that his mother, an ex nun was something like ten years older than she had been letting on. Her youngest sister (Mary) was my paternal grandmother, there is a picture of her in the book. the book itself is a very personal one, but not mawkish, my family (especially the Waldrons (the offspring of the one brother), who put up a website about their side of the family, cutting out the women, generally hate it.

It does what is set out to do in a very genuine and heartfelt way, without going too much into mawkishness. Not sure if I would have been keen to read it if it wasn't about the family of my great aunt and by extension their story but glad I did. (cheeky git never replied to my letter or random tweet mind, but I forgive him, the man can write)
