

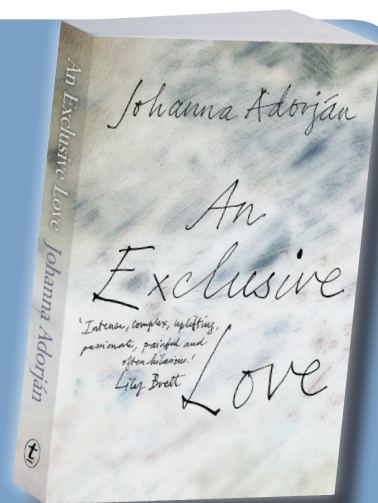
## An Exclusive Love

Johanna Adorján

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Fiction, Trade Paperback



### Praise

'Intense, complex, uplifting, passionate, painful and often hilarious.' Lily Brett

### About Johanna Adorján

Johanna Adorján has written several dramatic works, is currently an editor of the culture section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and lives in Berlin. *An Exclusive Love* is her first book.

### About Anthea Bell

Anthea Bell (OBE) is an award-winning translator whose translations include Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Cornelia Funke's *Inkworld* trilogy and the *Asterix* comics.

### A reader's introduction to *An Exclusive Love*

While this is the story of two elderly people who choose to end their lives in a suicide pact, for their granddaughter and the author of the book, Johanna Adorján, the journey involved ultimately becomes not just a memoir, but also an exploration of her own identity.

Johanna Adorján embarks on a mission to find out as much as she can about her grandparents who, on 13 October 1991, took their own lives. Having obtained a copy of *Final Exit* (a book banned in many countries because of its specific and detailed instructions about methods of suicide and how to effect a speedy and pain-free death) they took to their beds, drank vials of poison and lay down together holding hands as their eyes closed for the last time. This dramatic and methodically planned 'exit' fuels Adorján's curiosity and she sets about gathering information from across the globe. Interviewing friends, family and acquaintances, Adorján succeeds in piecing together the lives of two quite secretive individuals who spoke very little about their lives and, in particular, their experiences as Jews in the Holocaust.

Adorján returns to the countries in which her grandparents lived, visits their various homes, and interviews their remaining friends and family. In this way, alternating between chapters of interview and chapters of imagination and supposition, she pieces their lives together so that she can better understand what motivated them to undertake this pact. Curiously, it is the journey through her grandparents' lives that leaves the author closer to an understanding of her own roots, better able to understand her own affinities, and for the first time, feeling as if she belongs.

### Questions for discussion

1. Consider the issue of the reliability of memory. With this in mind, to what extent can the story hope to recreate a reliable image of Vera and Pista? Does the possibility of uncertainty detract from the story? Why/why not?
2. This book shifts in chronology, beginning many years after the suicide, and travelling forward and backward in both time and place. It uses supposition, research, memory, interview and imagination to construct the narrative. To what extent does the structure add to or detract from the tale? To what extent does the construction make this a more or less convincing story?
3. What might be the reason for Pista's sustained silence about his past? In spite of this silence, why might Pista be willing to discuss his suffering in the Korean War but not his suffering in Mathausen?
4. 'What price love?' Does love have a price? Should it? Can you understand Vera and Pista's choice? How would you act in the same circumstances?
5. If a biography is a record of one's life (as defined by the Macquarie dictionary) could this book be classed as such, despite its large sections of imaginative supposition? Must biography always be linked to verifiable evidence? Justify your view.

6. Consider the following thoughts on suicide:
  - ‘Does not their death above all suggest fear? A woman’s fear of being unloved, alone, a burden on others, perhaps sick and frail herself some day?’ (p.146) Is the suicide motivated by fear of being alone?
  - ‘Her thoughts go to her two children, but she does not allow herself to soften. They’re grown up, she thinks. They’ve had families of their own for years. They can’t expect her to stay alive for their sake now. It was her life. She owed no one anything. They’ll understand that, she decides.’ (p.164) Can this suicide be considered selfish?
  - ‘The answer is their great love.’ (p.164) Could their suicide be viewed as an act of love?
7. Should the writing of a narrative, which uses the life of others, be constrained by ethical considerations? Might the novel be considered a somewhat selfish indulgence? Refer to pages 102 and 103 in your answer to this question.
8. What is suggested by the title *An Exclusive Love*? Is the love described therein selfish or is it exclusive in the sense that it is precious?
9. Read pages 82 and 83 aloud. These passages suggest that Adorján’s grandparents were not interested in their Jewish heritage. Why do you think this is the case? Contrast their lack of willingness to discuss their Jewish heritage with their own family against their eagerness to confess their Jewishness when first meeting Helene and her husband. (p.79)

‘They said they were Jewish?’

‘Of course.’

‘On the first evening?’

‘Yes.’

  - Suggest another interpretation for these paragraphs. With this in mind, why might they have been troubled to learn that their son chose to marry a German girl? Can you understand why Adorján’s father gives his own children names with Hebrew origins and yet is unable to talk about his Jewish heritage, even in Israel? (p.83) Discuss the need to hide identity.
10. Re-read the chapter, beginning on page 83, in which the author discusses her inherent sense of belonging on her trip to Israel. Why do you think she felt this way? Is identity innate?
11. In seeking to understand the double suicide of her grandparents, Adorján comes to understand that in her grandmother she had a kindred spirit. Adorján describes her deepest feelings of lack of belonging on page 50: ‘(I) don’t know where it comes from. Ever since I can remember I have felt as if I were in the way... That is my deepest conviction and at the same time my greatest fear... What extraordinary news—my grandmother felt just like me?’ Adorján’s ability to connect with her dead grandmother leads her to regret her childhood plan to have her ‘Copenhagen grandmother, whom I apparently resemble so much, come so far down in my estimation. She was temperamental, unpredictable and egotistic. Just like me...’ (p.144) By exploring the character of her grandmother, the writer finds this strong link to herself. In so doing, she comes to a better understanding of herself. So whose story is this?