



# Secret Daughter: A Mixed-Race Daughter and the Mother Who Gave Her Away

By June Cross

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**Secret Daughter: A Mixed-Race Daughter and the Mother Who Gave Her Away** By June Cross

**A powerful memoir about the complicated but ultimately loving relationship between a black daughter and her white mother**

*Secret Daughter* is a deftly drawn and moving portrait of a childhood spent in two very different worlds: one white, one black. In 1957, when June Cross was four years old, she was sent by her white mother to live with a black family in Atlantic City. Her mother, Norma, had left June's abusive father, a comic in the well-known black vaudeville duo Stump and Stumpy, and gave June up when it became clear that her dark-skinned, kinky-haired child could no longer "pass." Within her adopted family, June struggled with her identity as the black radicalism of the times collided head on with her family's more traditional ideals. Summer vacations were spent with her mother, now in Hollywood and married to *F Troop* TV actor Larry Storch. For many years, Norma, afraid that Larry's career would suffer if anyone discovered the truth about her illegitimate daughter, told friends and reporters that June was adopted. *Secret Daughter*, which grew out of Cross's Emmy Award-winning documentary, traces this thorny story with poignancy and skill. It is both a vivid snapshot of race relations in America and an inspiring journey of understanding between a mother and daughter.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Using her 1997 Emmy Award–winning documentary, *Secret Daughter*, as inspiration for her memoir of the same name, Cross, a TV producer and journalism professor at Columbia University, narrates her life as the daughter of a white woman and a well-known black vaudevillian (Jimmy Cross) who was handed over to a black couple for rearing. Several elements fight for the center of this memoir: the emotional roller coaster of life spent between her bourgeois adoptive black family in Atlantic City and her Hollywood show business biological mother (who usually introduced her daughter as a niece or having been adopted); her undergraduate difficulties at the *Harvard Crimson*, "a club of smart-assed white boys and prefeminist women, more butch than liberated"; and life in the '60s ("It was the season of Angela Davis's trial, so prisons were hip"). She also weaves in gossipy show business tales that follow the career trajectory of *F Troop* actor Larry Storch as well as some settling of scores (Jerry Lewis borrowed from her father's act "Stump and Stumpy" but didn't send flowers to his funeral). Unfortunately, the bits and pieces fail to cohere, and her narrative often falls flat ("I rose from the piano stool and crossed the room") in what is otherwise an intriguing story. (May 22)

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From [Booklist](#)

At four years old, Cross was sent by her white mother, Norma, to live with a childless black couple in Atlantic City. Norma had finally come to terms with the difficulty of raising a mixed-race child in the 1950s, especially after the failure of her relationship with the child's father, a comic who was part of the famous black vaudeville act Stump and Stumpy. For Cross, it was the beginning of a life of confusion about racial identity, straddling the middle-class black world, where well-mannered behavior might stave off mistreatment, and her mother's freewheeling bohemian life of white entertainers. Her mother confided that if June hadn't darkened after birth, she would have kept her. After Norma's marriage to actor Larry Storch, it was even more urgent that it not be known that she had an illegitimate, mixed-race child, and Cross had to pretend to be Norma's niece or adopted daughter. This is a poignant follow-up on Cross' Emmy Award-winning documentary portraying the strains of a complicated family structure, ruptured by race, secrecy, and human fallibility. *Vanessa Bush*

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Review

A soul-searing coming-of-age story that plumbs the depths of America's most intractable problem—the ugly reality of racism. -- *Charlayne Hunter-Gault, author of In My Place*

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