

# The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo

## Contemporary Literature Portfolio

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The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo by Taylor Jenkins Reid was published in 2017. It tells the story of a fictional Cuban Hollywood actress, Evelyn Hugo (79 years old), who requested an unknown magazine journalist named Monique Grant. As the story goes on, it will reveal how their lives are intertwined.

But the big part of the book is not the mysterious relationship between Evelyn and Monique. As the title suggests, Evelyn has had 7 husbands, and the book talks a lot about them. But most importantly, it talks about Evelyn's life and her journey to become a Hollywood star, which started when she was still very young.

There are so many things in this book that I want to discuss in this essay. However, I'm just going to pick a few. The reason I picked this book to be a part of my portfolio is because it fits my chosen topic perfectly. Besides the history of Evelyn's life as a Hollywood star, this book also discusses gender inequality and discrimination towards the LGBT+ community. Some prominent issues in this book are sexual abuse, domestic violence, and homophobia.

### Sexual Abuse

When Evelyn Hugo was still a child, she lived in Hell's Kitchen—a neighborhood in New York—with her parents. When she was going through puberty as a 13-year-old, her body started to develop. That was when she was sexually abused by a 16-year-old boy named Billy who was the cashier at a corner store.

*One October day, I went down to the five-and-dime to buy a piece of candy, and he kissed me. I didn't want him to kiss me. I pushed him away. But he held on to my arm.*

*"Oh, come on," he said.*

*The store was empty. His arms were strong. He grasped me tighter. And in that moment, I knew he was going to get what he wanted from me whether I let him or not.*

*[...]*

*I never felt I had much choice in the matter. Being wanted meant having to satisfy. At least, that was my view of it back then.*

*I remember him saying, in the dark, cramped stockroom with my back against a wooden crate, "You have this power over me."*

*He'd convince himself that his wanting me was my fault.*

*And I believed him.*

After that, Evelyn started using her body as a currency to get what she wanted.

- *[...] if you tell a woman her only skill is to be desirable, she will believe you.*
- *"Look, I'd be the first person to say back when I was young that all I was was a nice pair of tits. The only currency I had was my sexuality, and I used it like money. I wasn't well educated when I got to Hollywood. I wasn't book-smart, I wasn't powerful, I wasn't a trained actress. What did I have to be good at other than being beautiful?"*

Evelyn arrived in Hollywood and wanted to be an actress. She took acting classes and began taking on small roles, then decided she wanted a bigger part. So she went to Ari Sullivan, a movie executive producer at Sunset Studio, to seduce him into giving her a movie role.

*I was seventeen. He was forty-eight.*

*That night, after his secretary left for the day, I was laid across his desk, with my skirt around my hips and Ari's face between my legs. It turned out Ari had a fetish for orally pleasing underage girls. [...] I couldn't tell you whether it was any good. But I was happy to be there, because I knew it was going to get me what I wanted.*

Even though Evelyn didn't mind using her body as a tool (because she has a bigger goal in mind), it's still sad that she had to resort to that choice, and it's awful that Ari Sullivan, who was a grown man, took a glance at a 17-year-old girl and knew that she is willing to do anything to succeed in the movie industry and took advantage of that without hesitation. Although technically Evelyn consented, she was still 17 years old at that time, so it counted as statutory rape under California's state law, which states that it's illegal for someone who's 18 years old or older to have sex with someone who's younger than 18 years old, because minors are not capable of giving informed consent to sexual activity.

## **Domestic Violence**

Evelyn Hugo's first husband, Don Adler, was an actor. Evelyn and Don starred in a few movies together, and then fell in love in the process. They later got married. In her marriage with Don, Evelyn suffered from domestic violence just two months after marrying him. Don was an abusive and manipulative man who held patriarchal values. One day, Don said Evelyn should

stop making movies so they could start having children. Evelyn refused, because she wanted to continue her acting career and became an even more successful actress.

- *His career wasn't turning out the way he wanted. And if he wasn't going to be the most famous person in his family, he surely wasn't going to allow that person to be me.*

*I looked right at him and said, "Absolutely. Positively. Not."*

*And he smacked me across the face. Sharp, fast, strong.*

- *I wasn't the only woman being hit back then. A lot of women were negotiating the very same things I was at that moment. There was a social code for these things. The first rule being to shut up about it.*

It was the first time, but certainly not the last time, that Don hit Evelyn. After that, Don would express his regret for hurting her and apologized, making Evelyn confused about the situation and decided to forgive him. But then, a pattern was formed.

- *A man hits you once and apologizes, and you think it will never happen again.*

*But then you tell him you're not sure you ever want a family, and he hits you once more. You tell yourself it's understandable, what he did. You were sort of rude, the way you said it. You do want a family someday. You truly do. You're just not sure how you're going to manage it with your movies. But you should have been more clear.*

*The next morning, he apologizes and brings you flowers. He gets down on his knees.*

*[...]*

*When he comes crawling to you in tears the next morning, you don't actually believe him anymore. But now this is just what you do. The same way you fix the hole in your dress with a safety pin or tape up the crack in a window.*

*That's the part I was stuck in, the part where you accept the apology because it's easier than addressing the root of the problem.*

- *Don had pushed me down the stairs nine days before. Even as I say it all these years later, I feel the need to defend him. To say that it wasn't as bad as it sounds. That we were toward the bottom of the stairs, and he gave me a shove that bumped me down about four steps and onto the floor.*

It got so bad to the point where Evelyn started feeling the need to defend her abuser. This is common in many abusive relationships, when the abuser manipulates the victim emotionally and

gaslights them, until the victim value themselves less and less and get even more dependent on their abuser.

## **Homophobia**

There was a new actress in Hollywood, Celia St. James, who was 3 years younger than Evelyn (Celia was 19 and Evelyn was 21 at that time). Celia was a good actress and she quickly climbed the ladder and got more parts in many movies as time went by. At first, Evelyn viewed her as a competition and didn't like her very much, but Celia wanted to be friends with her. Eventually, they did become friends, and they also starred in a movie together. Later, it was revealed that Celia was lesbian. Evelyn also began to develop romantic feelings for her, which revealed her own sexual orientation. Evelyn was bisexual.

*"Haven't you been listening to a single thing I've told you? I loved Celia, but I also, before her, loved Don. In fact, I'm positive that if Don hadn't turned out to be a spectacular asshole, I probably never would have been capable of falling in love with someone else at all. I'm bisexual. Don't ignore half of me so you can fit me into a box, Monique. Don't do that."*

When they finally started dating, it wasn't easy, because they were both public figures and being on the LGBT+ spectrum was still incredibly taboo in that time period (the 1960s). Evelyn and Celia would be in danger if people knew they were in a romantic relationship, so they hid their relationship from everyone. Evelyn thought they had to date other men so no one would suspect that they were together.

*"You need to listen to me," I said.*

*"You need to listen to me." She slammed the lid of the grill shut and gestured to me with a pair of silver tongs. "I'll go along with any of your little tricks that you want. But I'm not getting on board with either of us dating."*

*"We don't have a choice."*

*"We have plenty of choices."*

*"Not if you want to keep your job. Not if you want to keep this house. Not if you want to keep any of our friends. Not to mention that the police could come after us."*

*[...]*

*"No one is going to back us, Celia. I know how it feels to be shut out of this town. I'm just finally making my way back in. I know you're probably picturing some world where we go up against Goliath and win. But that's not gonna happen. We'd tell the truth about our lives, and they'd bury us. We could end up in prison or in a mental hospital."*

- *“You were ashamed to love me.”*

*“Absolutely not,” I said. “That is absolutely untrue.”*

*“Well, you certainly went to great lengths to hide it.”*

*“I did what had to be done to protect both of us.”*

Despite loving Celia very much, Evelyn had to elope with Mick Riva, a singer, to distract the press from suspecting her relationship with Celia. Therefore, they could be safe and their career would be safe. There was so much that they had to sacrifice just to keep being with each other. This caused a lot of conflicts in Evelyn and Celia’s relationship.

*You imagine a world where the two of you can go out to dinner together on a Saturday night and no one thinks twice about it. It makes you want to cry, the simplicity of it, the smallness of it. You have worked so hard for a life so grand. And now all you want are the smallest freedoms. The daily peace of loving plainly.*

The paragraph above is similar to the theme of “The First Summer”, a short story by Matthew Griffin, which I also included in my portfolio. For queer people, showing simple acts of intimacy and love in public can be extremely risky. It can bring tension and fear. Queer couples cannot show their love outside of the house, like straight couples can. They have to be extra careful to not be found out by unaccepting and judgmental people, when actually they only want “the daily peace of loving plainly”, just like what Evelyn said.

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo is a great novel with many life lessons in it. Besides giving me more insight about gender inequality and discrimination towards the LGBT+ community, it also teaches me that life is not always black and white.