

Growing Up in the Maison

A compelling memoir about the author's fascinating and controlling 'Aunt Hank.' Moira Hodgson reviews 'The Mighty Franks' by Michael Frank.

THE MIGHTY FRANKS

By Michael Frank

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When he is 8 years old, Michael Frank overhears his aunt say that she loves him “beyond life itself.” She tells his mother that Michael is the most marvelous child she’s ever known. “I wish he were mine.” She seems to mean it.

Her name is Harriet Frank Jr. , but she is known in the family as “Hank.” She and her husband, Irving Ravetch, are Hollywood screenwriters: “The Long Hot Summer,” “Hud,” “Norma Rae.” They are childless and doubly Michael’s aunt and uncle. (Each has a sibling who is one of Michael’s parents.) They live just three blocks away from him in Laurel Canyon, and Michael’s grandparents live nearby.

It all seems to have made for an unusual childhood, almost gothic in its strange intensities and yet intoxicating, too, at times. With “The Mighty Franks”—a phrase his aunt uses to describe the close-knit clan—Mr. Frank, a book critic and essayist, has written a marvelous, clear-eyed memoir about his eccentric family but especially about his glamorous but dangerously possessive Aunt Hank.

She tells him: “You and I, Lovey, are a thing apart. . . . The two of us have pulled our wagons up to a secret campsite. We know how lucky we are. We’re the most fortunate people in the world to have found each other, isn’t it so?”

Young Michael is besotted by her, a “tall, big-boned, round-faced, incandescent-eyed woman,” who decks her hair with flowers and leaves and paints her eyelids blue, penciling a beauty mark at the top of her right cheek. He writes: “I considered her quite simply to be the most magical human being I knew. Everything she touched, everything she did, was golden, infused with a special knowledge and a teeming vitality that transformed an ordinary conversation, or meal, or room, or moment, into an enchanted one.”

The boy lives for the times when she will arrive in her Buick Riviera to take him on one of their adventures, ignoring his two younger brothers, who stand at the window looking confused. She introduces Michael to books and pictures and encourages him to draw and write. “I’m sure that you will be an artist one day, Mike. . . . Everything you do has such *style*. Really and truly. It’s as if you’ve been immersed in aesthetics your whole entire life.” When she says this, he is 9 years old.

He’s still only 9 when she hands him two books to read. “Take my word for it, Lovey, between *Of Human Bondage* and *Sons and Lovers* you’ll learn everything you need to know about what it feels to be a certain kind of young person. *Your* kind, if I may say.” As he stares dubiously at the dense print, she adds: “It’s time to get started, quick-quick, on reading grown-up novels.”

Over the next few years, to train her precocious nephew's eye, she takes him on shopping trips "noodling around" for art and antiques, dismissing certain items as "mo-derne" or "country" or "Shaker-shmaker." Mr. Frank writes that he felt clever "merely by being with her and listening to her, learning what she had to teach, absorbing some of her spark—her sparkle."

Aunt Hank believed in absolutes, and Mr. Frank calls her a "juggernaut of unstoppable opinion." It was "yes" to the Renaissance, "no" to the Middle Ages; Periclean Athens made the grade but not those "death-obsessed and stylizing ancient Egyptians or those copyists and engineers the Romans." Faulkner (two of whose books she and her husband adapted into films) was permitted but not Hemingway and not Fitzgerald, who "was a drunk who drove his wife mad." Mr. Frank writes of himself: "Did a boy dare speak up, ever? Sure he did. He spoke up to parrot and assent, agree and confirm. It was the only way."

Aunt Frank's house, which she calls the "maison," is jam-packed with paintings of aristocrats and souvenirs of the Grand Tour, including an onyx figure of Napoleon, for whom she has had a lifelong passion—"not because he was a dictator, mind you, but because he wrote the most beautiful love letters and freed the Jews from the ghetto."

As she rides around with the boy captive in the car, Aunt Hank becomes increasingly manipulative. "You have to know that it would be perfectly all right if you told me what you felt deep down about your father or . . . your mother. You know I would always understand." Michael, now 13, reacts to her remarks by "going dead."

Meanwhile Uncle Irv comes across as an acquiescent figure, though eccentric in his own way. When faced with a shelf of floor solvents, Mr. Frank writes, Irv "would hold up to the light first one bottle and then another, evaluating them in mock imitation of the way other men might evaluate a fine burgundy." Irv's place for strategic retreat is his private walk-in closet, where he goes to smoke cigars. Michael likes to join him there because it is a refuge from his aunt, at least for a while.

One afternoon at the maison, when Michael is still 13, his aunt looks at him with "glittering eyes." She turned to Irv. "Don't you wish he were ours?" she says, her voice "cracking and her face suddenly full of desire." "Let's steal him!" Michael begins to worry that she has some kind of mental imbalance that makes her yearn to do just that, a worry that is hardly assuaged when she confides: "*Sometimes, Lovey, affinity trumps blood—do you know what I mean by that?*"

"The Mighty Franks" develops an almost thriller-like pace as Michael begins to draw away from his increasingly desperate aunt. When he turns down an invitation from her she becomes like a character in a Roald Dahl story, terrifying and disruptive. Mr. Frank writes: "Philip Roth somewhere mocks Henry James for describing moments in which characters are said to rear up. Who, he wonders, rears up in actual life? Roth never laid eyes on my aunt."

The color scheme of the maison, habitually changed according to mood, becomes increasingly dark. One day Michael notices that Aunt Hank has painted everything black: the woodwork, flowerpots, statuary. The family is roiled by her manic behavior. He can't figure it out either and soon breaks free of her spell. Eventually he moves to New York, marries and has a daughter.

When she reached old age, Mr. Frank would visit her, wondering each time if it would be the last, as she underwent her inexorable decline. She is still alive, age 100. The memory of her when she was younger

clearly continues to haunt him, one result being this beautifully written book. Maybe Aunt Hank should get some credit for that.

—*Ms. Hodgson is the author of
“It Seemed Like a Good Idea at
the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food.”*