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BIOGRAPHY & MEMOIRS

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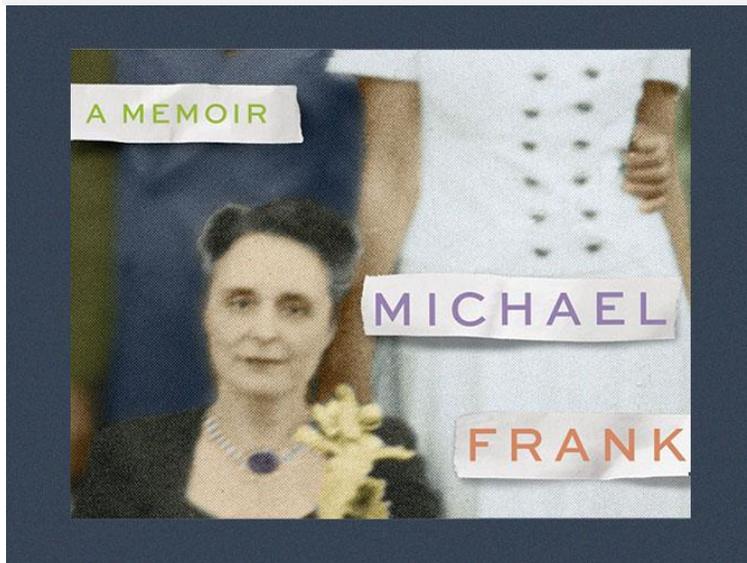
Michael Frank

**THE MIGHTY FRANKS**

A memoir

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## A boy named Suzie

MICHAEL SALER

Memoirs that recount physical and sexual abuse abound, but Michael Frank's may be the first to expose narrative abuse. In *The Mighty Franks*, he recalls being imprinted for life by a pair of Los Angeles "sorcerers", verbal enchanters who immured him within a fairy-tale world. Frank uses such imagery deliberately: the beguiling couple, Harriet Frank, Jr and Irving Ravetch, were prominent Hollywood screenwriters who captivated millions through their dream worlds. (Their many notable films included *Hud* and *Norma Rae*.)

They were also his aunt and uncle, a childless couple for whom fabricating reality gradually went from being a day job to a way of life. They cast Frank as a Renaissance boy, educating him during his frequent visits to appreciate the fine arts and distinguish himself from his peers. (His aunt called him "Lovey"; the boys at

school called him “Suzie”, before beating him up.) As a pre-teen in the late 1960s, Frank was dazzled by the idea of being the Chosen One of “alternate parents who lived in an alternate reality”. *The Mighty Franks* is a witty, moving account of Frank’s dawning apprehension of his entranced state and his subsequent efforts to reclaim himself.

Frank’s bids for autonomy were made difficult by two unusual circumstances. First, his immediate and extended families were claustrophobically intertwined: his aunt was his father’s older sister, and his uncle was his mother’s older brother. They all lived within a few blocks from each other; Frank’s grandmothers shared a nearby home as well. Visits were therefore frequent, enabling old family dynamics to play out in new, dysfunctional patterns. (As his mother lamented to a friend, “There’s my brother, who is also the husband of my husband’s sister. There’s my husband, who is a grown man in his forties but still his sister’s baby brother”.) His father’s side of the family included several strong personalities, whose triumphal notion of “The Mighty Franks” provided the de facto motto of the clan. “Troupe” may be a better characterization: Frank finds that his family’s immersion in Hollywood and the quotidian phantasmagoria of Los Angeles generated a situation where “everyone was acting, everyone was pretending: too many books had been read, too many movies seen (or conceived, or made). A family that has quite literally written, or story-analyzed, itself into a better, sunnier life”.

The second reason has to do with the strongest of these personalities, Harriet (aka “Hank”). A cross between Auntie Mame and Cruella de Vil, she mesmerizes nearly everyone she meets, transfixing them with her wit, ebullience and sheer will to dominate. Frank describes her as a “tall, big-boned, round-faced, incandescent eyed woman . . . I consider her quite simply to be the most magical human being I ever knew”. With her bouffant hair decorated with flowers or leaves, blue-shadowed eyelids and an artfully applied beauty mark on her cheek, Harriet lived for attention, preferably adoration. She “pretended, or maybe assumed, that there was an audience following her . . . at all times”.

Frank’s parents were increasingly disturbed by the way Harriet focused on their eldest son as a replacement for the child she never had, and as a worshipful acolyte who would reliably reflect her grandiose self-image. (She told him many times, in different ways, “We really are made of the same stuff, thee and me”.) The young Frank was showered with gifts and attention as his cultivated aunt taught him the secrets of connoisseurship in art and life. But he was distressed by her attempts to turn him against his other relations to focus on her exclusively. Harriet also routinely excommunicated votaries who failed to grant her every whim. When Frank tried to assert some independence as a teenager, she verbally transmuted him from a prince charming into a monster ungrateful, deploying crafty incantations to restore his loyalty.

Rendering such an operatic figure credible would be a challenge for any writer. Frank admits that he initially attempted to capture Harriet in fiction, but his readers found her unbelievable. In this narrative, however, she emerges as a fully realized and unforgettable persona, simultaneously attractive and horrifying in her capacity for generosity, cruelty and devouring narcissism. Frank reveals that uncle Irving was able to maintain a degree of freedom from his wife’s domineering ways. While their mansion was almost entirely an expression of Harriet’s personality, decorated floor to ceiling with the antiques she obsessively collected, Irving reserved a large closet for himself. More important, though, was his “way of regarding the whole of his

life . . . with a kind of perpetual double vision”, which allowed him to maintain an ironic distance from his wife’s enveloping fantasies. As he got older this ability diminished, until he and Harriet merged to become “HankandIrv”, resolute in their *folie à deux*.

Michael Frank has not freed himself from their conjurations; this account is a further exorcism. He concludes with a life lesson: “You learn to carry on, no matter what, and not to wait for people to become what they are incapable of becoming”. But this is one of the few banal observations in an otherwise beautifully written and timely work that bears another lesson. Given that fiction and reality threaten to become inextricable today, *The Mighty Franks* is a cautionary tale, and Irving’s “double vision” a salutary response.