

Five Best: Michael Frank

on books that blur the line between memoir and novel

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War and Turpentine

By Stefan Hertmans (2013)

1. They have always been out there, hiding in plain sight, books that defy easy categorization: Are they memoirs? Novels? Both? Neither? Does it even matter? In “War and Turpentine,” Flemish writer Stefan Hertmans eludes a fixed genre, and the result is the deeply moving story of Urbain Martien, his painter grandfather, whose diaries Mr. Hertmans inherited but did not read for 30 years. When he did, he performed a narrative autopsy on his formidable ancestor, who survived a Dickensian childhood, a stint in an iron foundry and the death of his true love before going off to fight in World War I, where he was injured three times and three times sent back to battle. Mr. Hertmans captures Urbain’s wartime experience in a tour de force of literary ventriloquism, seamlessly inhabiting the psyche of his dead grandfather, who “seemed to possess my body . . . and draw me completely into his emotions, into the world that had always been closed to me.”



Michael Frank PHOTO: NANCY CRAMPTON

The Door

By Magda Szabó (1987)

2. It is offered as a novel, and it reads like . . . a novel. But what is it? “The Door” feels deeply, personally, at times agonizingly lived. Its narrator, Magda, shares a name with the author. She has been rehabilitated as a writer in communist Hungary and is moving into a new apartment. Her husband becomes ill. That is the plot, pretty much. What really happens is that two people construct a relationship before our eyes: Magda and Emerence, her housekeeper, who is no ordinary housekeeper and no ordinary person either. She interviews Magda—not the other way around. The house is run on her terms. She communicates, soul-to-soul, with the dog. She is unsentimental and maddeningly closed. The moral dilemmas that arise between these two women initially seem pointillist in scale but turn achingly profound, leading Magda to worry that Emerence’s eventual death would constitute “yet another addition to those ubiquitous, indefinable shadow-presences that wrack me and drive me to despair.” “The Door” is ultimately about how one person establishes that shadow presence in another person’s life.

Out of Egypt

By André Aciman (1994)

3. Yes, this is a memoir, but it’s one whose author doesn’t limit himself to drawing scenes he has witnessed firsthand. Consider one of the more unforgettable interludes that help rescue from lost time the story of André Aciman’s Jewish family’s life in Alexandria, where they had moved from Turkey in 1905 and remained for three generations before leaving Egypt for good in the 1960s: Mr. Aciman re-creates the evening his parents met at a dance. In placing himself there as imagined witness, Mr. Aciman opens just one of many windows in this many-chambered villa of a book. (And who among us would not want to have been present at such an encounter?) Others reveal portraits of his two grandmothers, the Princess and the Saint, who lived across the street from each other in tense rivalry. There’s Uncle Vili, a con man and lothario, and Aunt Flora, who ends up by herself in an attic in Venice. The writer’s father, absorbed by his business and his girlfriends, leaves Mr. Aciman’s deaf mother alone with “this truth about her ears, that she would . . . never hear music, never hear laughter, never hear my voice.” The guiding spirit is Proust’s, but the atmosphere, longing and awareness of the fragility of this rapidly vanishing world are Mr. Aciman’s own.

Transit

By Rachel Cusk (2016)

4. **'Transit'** follows "Outline" as the second installment in Rachel Cusk's emerging trilogy of novels—so-called novels. Faye, the narrator, is a writer. Newly divorced, she buys and rehabilitates an apartment in deplorable condition. She has her hair done. She runs into an old boyfriend and describes the goings-on at a writers' conference and a dinner party. These few beats hardly sound like a recipe for an extended meditation on what it means to connect—or fail to—with other human beings. "Transit" is an original book about the experience of perceiving and collecting other people's stories and ideas—their very interiority. ("I had found out more . . . by listening," the narrator says at one point, "than I had ever thought possible.") It contains some perspicacious writing about writing, including this, about Julian, a colleague of Faye's who has just completed a memoir of his abusive stepfather: "Writing it had been both a torment and a relief, like pulling a knife out of his own chest."

Notes of a Son and Brother

By Henry James (1914)

5. A **loose, baggy** monster of a memoir, this second of James's three projected volumes of autobiography began when James sat down to edit a volume of letters written by his older brother, William. The notes turned into pages, and the pages accrued into an account of his early years that is by turns meandering and obscure, frustrating and enthralling, and even comedic (the brothers' famous rivalry, not always a buoyant subject, is rendered with some irony). As often with retrospective understanding, several moments in young Henry's early life seem to point, as if by predestination, to the novelist's honed sensibility. After the memoir was published, James had to explain why he had "retouched" William's letters. In a dense and rather uncomfortable apology to William's son, Harry, he said that "the ideal of documentary exactitude, verbatim . . . free of all living back imaginatively" was not his intention. His defense speaks to all boundary-testing books, where sometimes living back imaginatively is the only way to capture the past.