



Looking back in anguish

Michael Frank's fight to escape his noxious aunt's clutches makes powerful reading.

by LINDA HERRICK

Writer Michael Frank is a brave man. His memoir, *The Mighty Franks*, paints an excoriating portrait of his relationship with his aunt, Harriet "Hank" Ravetch, an acclaimed Hollywood screenwriter who co-scripted such classics as *Hud*, *Norma Rae*

and *Stanley & Iris*. He reveals her as a monster – and, now aged 100, she is still alive.

Frank was born into an unusual family.

His uncle (married to Hank) was his mother's brother, and Hank was his father's sister. The two families lived close together

during the 1960s in Laurel Canyon, in the Hollywood Hills, and his grandmothers lived together nearby. Hank called the extended family "The Mighty Franks", but she was the mightiest of all, the spider at the centre of the web. No one dared challenge her.

As a child, Mike worshipped his glamorous, snobby aunt and her husband, Irving, her mild-mannered screenwriting partner. They had no children. With her tenet "Make beauty whenever possible", she lured Mike into her realm of books, art and aesthetics, loading him with gifts, outings in her Buick and "torrents of words". Whenever they went out, his two younger brothers were always left behind.

Hank had a Baby Jane streak, from the beauty spot she painted on her thickly coated face each day to her viciousness towards family and friends whenever she perceived a slight. Young Mike started

to see that when she began relentlessly undermining his mother (her sister-in-law): "Darling, you do know there's would always understand."

His parents tried to limit his visits, but he couldn't back away. Gradually, Hank shaped a boy who would be bullied at school. He developed crippling stomach pains along with feelings of dread when she said such things to her husband as "Let's steal him!" Mike realised she already had, and his fight to escape this "noxious enthrallment" began. It has lasted all his life.

His battles have comic nothing wrong with not liking your parent ... your mother ... You know I moments. On one occasion, with the two families on an uneasy beach holiday, Mike and brother Danny decided to deviate from Hank's strict schedules. They simply wanted to eat off paper plates so they could skip doing the dishes and

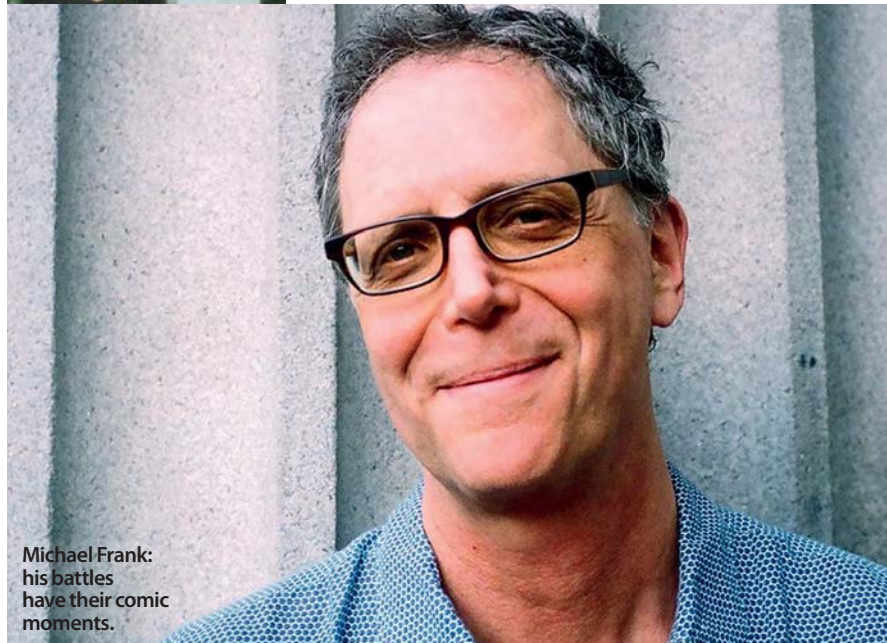
watch fireworks. Fireworks indeed. "Philip Roth somewhere mocks Henry James for describing moments in which characters are said to rear up. Who, he wonders, rears up in actual life? Roth had never laid eyes on my aunt."

As he aged, Mike saw an embittered woman addicted to shopping, constantly decorating a house he describes as Hollywood Regency. She didn't live by the tenet of making beauty but by a merciless pattern of divide and rule.



Towards the end, he softens his perspective as she loses her husband in an extraordinarily drawn death scene. But the damage seems permanent. This powerful, eloquent memoir may help cauterise some of his pain. But ... she still lives. ■

THE MIGHTY FRANKS, by Michael Frank
(4th Estate, \$29.99)



Michael Frank:
his battles
have their comic
moments.