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Alchemy of an unsimple love

Gaby Wood on a superb memoir of staying sane in a dysfunctional Hollywood family

THE MIGHTY FRANKS
by Michael Franks

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★★★★★

"Perspective does not come to us while we are living life. Only afterward," Michael Frank's mother told him when she was old and ill. But Frank himself seems to have had an unearthly capacity for perspective all along. There is a lastingly sane quality to his riveting memoir, *The Mighty Franks*, that's reminiscent of *To Kill A Mockingbird*: we learn, via the double lens of a precocious childhood and clear-sighted adult reminiscence, a story of familial monstrosity.

The anti-heroine is Hank, the author's aunt, a Hollywood screenwriter married to another Hollywood screenwriter, Irving Ravetch. ("Hank" is her own short form of Harriet Frank.) By the Sixties, when this story begins, they are childless, and live near Michael's parents, who have three children. The Frank family mesh is tightly woven: Hank is Michael's double aunt – she is his father's sister, and she is also married to his mother's brother. (Got that?) Here's another way of putting it. Michael's father, Marty, married "his older sister's husband's younger sister". (No better, is it?) But the "immense, unwieldy, exhausting puzzle," as Frank puts it, is not that. The family tree is not a puzzle to those who populate it. The puzzle is the family dynamic, which is horrific.

Anti-heroine: Harriet Frank or 'Hank', the author's controlling aunt, on the set of *Hud* with her husband and fellow screenwriter, Irving Ravetch, in 1962, left; Hollywood in its Fifties heyday, top

"Don't you wish he were ours?" Hank says to Irving, of Michael. "Let's steal him!" This is not a joke. Hank, who suffers from endometriosis, is unable to have children, and has found among her nephews a single one who could be her soul mate. You could say she adopts Michael, but invades would be more like it. She extravagantly prefers him, and for many years the affection is reciprocal. "You could call it gravity. Or alchemy. Or intoxication. Or simply love," Frank writes. "But what an unsimple love this was." It becomes the central problem not only of Michael's life but of everyone's.

Each Saturday, and, during the holidays, every day, Hank collects Michael in her car and takes him on an outing. This might be a visit to his two grandmothers (who, in Mighty Frank style, live together), or it could be an excursion to buy antiques. She instructs him on life and culture – who to rate, how to behave – and tells him a slanted story about their family history. He returns, every time, with gifts, which his younger brothers note in silence. "Make beauty. At all times," Hank declares, "and of course be fast about it [...] No naps." She is glamorous, in a mid-century Hollywood way, and utterly sure of her opinions. Hank, even when in her apparently right mind, is a Joan Crawford sort of character.

Hank and Irving met at MGM studios in 1945. They went on to adapt, together, novels by William Faulkner and Larry McMurtry. They wrote a Western for Errol Flynn, a romance for Robert Mitchum, and the Paul Newman vehicle, *Hud*. But Michael Frank's education was in the classics: "conversations about Faulkner and Fellini in the library". On summer days he's reduced, in desperation, to reading Balzac. And so the filter through which he sees the world is coloured by his strangely learned background. It's also, perhaps, why he's bullied at school.

We learn that Hank had a phantom child, a planned child, a girl who was to have been called Agatha. Occasionally Agatha puts in an appearance, as someone to be measured against. "Agatha would have read *The Mill on the Floss* by the time she was seven," Hank asserts. "Agatha would have started composing poetry as soon as she could hold a pen." Eventually, as Michael distances himself from his aunt, she unravels further. On an ill-fated trip to Paris, she says: "I have to ask you, what is it about you, Michael, that is so broken and wounded?" But by then, you know both that she has been the cause and that he is likely to survive it.

'Don't you wish he were ours?' says his overbearing aunt. 'Let's steal him!'

Though the story is told from the point of view of the author – now a critic and travel writer – there is a subplot here about women's lives. Michael's mother, Merona, joins a consciousness-raising group while Hank is essentially still living the life that she led in the Forties. Until the death of Hank's mother – also a story editor, who used to work for Louis B Mayer – she and Hank gang up on Merona. By the time the two bulldozing women have decorated Merona's home in her absence, it already feels like bullying, and we're only on page 31. Merona does liberate herself from her in-laws, but not in time to remove her son from his aunt's aspic clutches.

The book's real staying power, though, comes from the questions it raises about suggestibility. The memoir's denouement, inevitably, is that Frank is made to feel that *he's* the one who is out of his mind. He leads us to ask: is it possible that a boy so sculpted in the image of his uncompromising aunt could have consented to this level of manipulation? And, despite all the pain, might her attentions have been a blessing? "She has power over me that I do not comprehend," he writes, something he could not say at the time. "I don't know who I would be if I were not both singled out and outcast, a victim who is also, as it happens, a prince."

Frank has conjured "a plausible story out of implausible facts", an extraordinary tale that unfolds on the border between abuse and enlightenment.