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Franklin, Ruth. *The Many Lives of Anne Frank.* Yale University Press, 2025.

Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

Accomplished biographer Ruth Franklin, whose maternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors who shared their grief with her, wanted to write an unconventional biography about Anne Frank. She succeeds brilliantly in "The Many Lives of Anne Frank," freed from the constraints of traditional biography. It had always irritated Franklin when her colleagues claimed there was nothing left to say about the Jewish icon. She felt otherwise.

But Franklin had trouble getting started. She couldn't fathom how she would structure such an undertaking. The author's musings on her Substack newsletter about her pending work barely conceals her overwhelming enthusiasm, but also charts her difficulties figuring out a way to start a compelling story. She writes: "Biography is founded on the principle of radical empathy: you attempt to see the world from the perspective of your subject…The point is to get inside someone else's mind, in whatever way you can, to try and understand the forces that affected them and the decisions they made."

Standing on an airport line, Franklin had an epiphany: "What if I structured my book around Anne's identities-all the different things she meant, and still means, to people? Right there in the line, I started making a list. Child, refugee, target of Nazi regulations, lover (her relationship with Peter van Pels), prisoner (Westerbork, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen), corpse (her terrible death). All the identities around her diary: witness (the author of testimony), artist (revising it for publication), author. And the different ways in which she goes on living after her death: celebrity (the success of the US publication), ambassador (the play's dissemination of her story around the world), survivor (all the literature about her), and figurehead (the use of her name and image for political purposes)."

Franklin begins with a personal memory of visiting the Annex where the Frank family hid for over 2 years as a young girl thinking the space "impossibly cramped." She returned 40 years later and her "body registered how rickety and steep the staircases were, set at such a narrow angle that she kept banging her knee as she climbed into it."

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Franklin, like many other scholars, wants to set the record straight about Anne's diary and its evolution. She explains there are three versions of the diary. The first, known as Version A, is the diary Anne began writing when they went into hiding when she was a 13-year-old girl. Version B is a revised edition of the entire diary Anne began writing months before the Gestapo burst in and arrested her and her sister Margot and their parents, the van Pels and their son Peter, and Fritz Pfeffer who were all hiding together in the Annex trying to survive the war. Version C is the published version of Anne's diary after it had been edited by her father. And of course, there were further edits by the publishers Otto Frank worked with. Otto Frank, who died at 91 in 1980, never explained the reason for some of his revisions except to say he always kept what he felt was Anne's intentions for her work close to his heart.

Many have taken issue with Otto Frank and the presumptions he made about what should remain in the final cut well before all of her drafts were released years later. Otto removed certain passages where Anne wrote about her ongoing tense relationship with her mother. He also deleted Anne's impression of her parent's loveless marriage. Anne had chosen to leave out her infatuation and romance with Peter van Pels that was present in the first draft, but Otto added it back in perhaps believing it to be essential to her overall experience in hiding. Anyone comparing Anne's first and second version, despite her father's insertions or deletions from the second draft, notices Anne's evolution as a writer who now had a sophistication and self-knowledge absent from her first draft. Franklin is particularly moved by this passage in the second draft which showed her awareness of the fragility of the situation she and her family were in: "It is almost impossible to escape, the people in the camp are all branded as inmates by their shorn heads and their Jewish appearance. If it is as bad as this in Holland, whatever will it be like in the distant and barbarous regions they are sent to? We assume that most of them are murdered. The English radio speaks of them being gassed: perhaps that is the quickest way to die." Franklin portrays Otto Frank, despite his disturbances to her diary, as a sympathetic man who had suffered unimaginable loss. She believes he was driven by his ongoing effort to have Anne's words reach the entire world; first through the diary, then the Broadway play, and finally the motion picture. She believes by making her story

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more universal in tone, Otto Frank thought he increased the odds more would take to it, and felt it still showed the utter depravity of Nazism and antisemitism.

To show us Anne's metamorphosis into a more sensitive and nuanced writer, she provides two excerpts, both describing the same event. The first one is from the first version and the latter from Anne's revised work:

Version A

October 15, 1942

"Yesterday we had another terrible fright. The carpenter was working in front of our cupboard…We hadn't been warned and were calling blithely to one another all through the house. Suddenly after lunch, Bep had just decided to go downstairs. I heard some hammering, and I said psst upstairs, but we thought it was Mummy who was just coming down the attic stairs…I heard it again, and the others did too, that's when we realized the carpenter was there…Suddenly we heard terrible rattling, at our door. We thought it was the carpenter wanting to come and have a look here. It was terrifying."

Version B

"My hand still shakes although it's two hours since we had the shock. I should explain that there are five fire extinguishers in the house. Downstairs they are such geniuses that they didn't warn us when the carpenter or whatever the fellow is called, was coming to fill them. The result was we weren't making any attempt to be silent until I heard hammering outside on the landing opposite our cupboard door…Daddy and I posted ourselves at the door, so as to hear when the man left. After he's been working for a quarter of an hour, he laid his hammer tools down on top of our cupboard (as we thought!) and knocked at our door. We turned absolutely white. Perhaps he had heard something after all and wanted to investigate our secret den."

But complaints about Otto Frank are still debated ferociously to this day. Most notably, Cynthia Ozick has written about her fury with the way she believes Anne's words were "bowdlerized, distorted, transmuted, traduced, reduced: It has been infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized; falsified, kitschified, and, in fact, blatantly and arrogantly denied" by those like Ruth Franklin who believe Otto Frank's actions were nothing more than banal neglect. Franklin adds that Anne Frank came from a family which was thoroughly assimilated and thought about their Judaism as nothing more than an ethnicity and culture, and not a living religion. When Anne mentioned God in the diary, it wasn't the Jewish God she was addressing, but rather vague notions of spirituality and its connection to nature which she revered. She dreamed of being able to go outside again. Franklin feels Ozick's fury is misplaced anger and makes it more difficult for us to find our way back to Anne Frank and her family and what they and so many millions of other Jews endured. Franklin regrets how little information is available about Anne Frank's last months in

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concentrations camps where there are only vague snapshots from weary survivors who interacted with her in the camps.

Franklin takes the focus off Anne for a while and describes her parents and grandparents for us. Otto Frank was born in Frankfurt am Main to immensely rich parents. Anne Frank's paternal grandfather, Michael Frank, owned a bank and became a millionaire. He came from Landau in der Pfalz, a town in the countryside about eighty miles south of Frankfurt, where the Jewish community was hundreds of years old. Anne's paternal grandmother, Alice Stern Frank, was an upper-class German lady who could trace her ancestors in Frankfurt back to the seventeenth century. Anne's grandparents frequently vacationed at a resort in the Black Forest, had their own box at the opera, and arranged for Otto as a young boy to learn cello and ride horses. Anne's mother, Edith, came from Aachen, and was also from a wealthy family. When World War I began, Otto was among the 100,000 Jews to enlist; an illustration of both their comfort in Germany and their patriotism. We come to better understand Anne Frank by learning about her lineage.

Franklin examines Anne's romance with Peter van Pels telling us she didn't take to him immediately but developed intense feelings for him in hiding; that is, of course, until she didn't any longer. Anne was a passionate driven soul desperate for a glorious future and Peter lacked incentive to become anything special. This was a crucial difference between them. Franklin admits she feels treasonous reviewing these passages knowing it was clearly Anne's intention to remove them from our view; and that she is seeing them only because her father decided it should be so after her death. Still, she admits to finding this side of Anne's personality compelling.

There are other passages in Anne's earlier version about having dreams about touching one of her friend's breasts that Anne removed as well, but her father put back in thinking it to be nothing more than innocent adolescent wanderings. The publishers removed it when they published the diary believing it might ruffle some feathers. Anne had decided at fifteen years old to keep certain things about herself private, but she was already dead when decisions about what would be revealed and concealed were made in her absence.

Franklin's book often stops short and offers us various interludes from impassioned readers who have read Anne Frank's diary and been irreparably changed by it. Franklin spends many pages

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examining at how Anne has been both understood and misinterpreted as the decades have passed. She looks at how Anne's image has been canonized into support for causes Anne Frank might have disapproved of had she lived to have a say about how her image as a writer and survivor could be used.

In 1979, Philip Roth wrote in "The Ghost Writer" about an Anne Frank who somehow survived and has become his protagonist's fiancé. Philip Roth's book mocks the sacred figure she has been turned into in many arenas. However, Roth admits relating deeply to one of her rants: "We can never become Netherlanders or just English or a nation for that matter, we will always remain Jews, we must remain Jews, but we want to, too." Both Roth and Franklin seem to sense that if Anne Frank had survived, she would have been a challenger of norms, and full of curiosity about all things and peoples. Miep Gies, who hid the Frank family at great personal risk, remembers Anne as friendly and full of life, unlike her more muted and obedient sister Margot.

Modern biography is reinventing itself into an exciting new art form and Ruth Franklin's new work is representative of this new spirit. She isn't coerced into following any one set of principles other than her own intellectual and literary inclinations. So, one wonders why this erudite author didn't think to include her own biographical rendering regarding her Jewish identity and her relationship to the Holocaust and Anne Frank. It seems an oversight in a work not strained by ordinary conventions. Franklin is a granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and clearly has been interested in the ramifications of the Holocaust on subsequent generations for a long time. Her first widely acclaimed book, "A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction (2010)," plunged into the depths of Holocaust fiction and memoir writing mining them for insights as to the unseen mysteries that lay beneath the utter moral depravity of the Shoah. Ruth Franklin's own relationship to her Jewishness, particularly at this harrowing time, when we are witnessing the shattering of the modern Jewish psyche right before our eyes as world events unfold, would have would have added much to this otherwise stellar narrative.

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