

The tension in many autobiographical narratives written in the Soviet period, between exploring the authentic inner self and evoking elements of an identity forged to suit prevailing circumstances, is one thing at issue in Stanton's concluding chapter, "Reinventing the Self: Valentin Kataev and Yury Olesha." Here she turns to two contemporaries who, unlike Babel, survived Stalinism and wrote works of autobiography near the ends of their lives. In examining Kataev's *My Diamond Crown* and Olesha's *No Day without a Line*, Stanton engages the problems of making a literary career within the constraints of the Soviet situation, as well as the preoccupation of both writers with their place relative to the literary tradition. In the context of the writings of Kataev and Olesha (and of Konstantin Paustovsky, also discussed here), Babel comes to be seen as both contemporary and precursor. Stanton explores the ways in which the autobiographical writings of all these figures "bordered upon and implicated one another," and "in inventing themselves," she argues, "they were also inventing a narrative of each other, of Odessa, and of Soviet literature that would compete for authority with the 'scientific' version advanced by historians" (p. 41).

Stanton's writing is clear and lively. It can be vivid at times, as when she describes the narrator's exultant and panicked recitation of Shakespeare in "In the Basement" as a case of "declamatory berserkism" (p. 86). She brings to her topic a broad frame of reference and a thoughtful approach to strategies for reading autobiographical prose. *Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism* makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of truth and "truth" in storytelling, of Babel's childhood stories in particular, and of Odessa as cultural crucible and cultural construct.

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Freidin, Gregory, ed. *The Enigma of Isaac Babel: Biography, History, Context*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. xvi + 270 pp. \$60.00. ISBN 978-0-8047-5903-8.

It took nearly six years since an international conference on Isaac Babel was held at Stanford in 2004 for the edited volume based on that event to appear from Stanford University Press. A number of articles in the volume have come out as part of other books, in Russian and English, in the intervening period. The conference itself has since been unforgettably described by Elif Batuman (whose article on Babel as clerk and clerkship as metaphor in his work is featured in the current volume) in her essay "Babel in California," first published in *n+1* (2005) and, later, in Batuman's *The Possessed*, a memoir of her time in graduate school at Stanford (2010). True to Babel's famous quip in "My First Fee" that "real life is only too eager to resemble a well-devised story," *The Enigma of Isaac Babel*, coming out as it does after "Babel in California," might tempt a nosey academic to read the scholarly volume for the unmasking of the identities of the Stanford conference participants disguised in Batuman's whimsical memoir prose. Nonetheless, the volume gathers together important, if uneven, critical perspectives on Isaac Babel that stand very well on their own.

The volume is broken down into three parts. Part One, titled "Attempting a Biography," consists of contributions by Patricia Blake and Gregory Freidin. Blake, who died in 2010 before completing her biography of Babel, was a journalist in the Soviet Union in the 1960s when the tale of her "adventures and misadventures" (p. 3) of researching Babel's biography is set. Blake's piece is a memoir about an attempted biography rather than a

biography itself; it precedes Freidin's reading of Babel's play *Maria* as an autobiographic text, which, at forty pages in length with several additional pages of illustrations, is the volume's centerpiece. An ambitious intertextual reading, Freidin's contribution traces some of the most enigmatic aspects of Babel's biography, such as his purported work for the Cheka in the immediate postrevolutionary period, across Babel's life and texts. Freidin's essay looks for concealed biographical clues in fiction and then ties fiction back to an attempted biography: a productive and far-reaching approach in its own right and one that is certain to result in a significant contribution to the field once Freidin completes his monograph-length biography of Isaac Babel.

Part Two places Babel in various contexts of Russian history. Oleg Budnitsky's essay considers the treatment of Jews by Red Army soldiers during the Russo-Polish War of 1920 that Babel wrote about in his masterpiece, *Red Cavalry*, and that he would have witnessed himself as a wartime journalist. Carol J. Avins' article is also a look at the issue of Jewishness in Babel's work, which retraces some of the same ground (particularly Babel's writings about postrevolutionary Petrograd) that Freidin addresses in his essay; her particular emphasis is on the story "The Journey," which, according to Avins, connects the Jewish experience of the Revolution with that of the Romanov royal family's experience of the upheaval. Michael S. Gorham considers the Soviet state's early attempts at the cultivation of public language and its permutation in two works of fiction about the Civil War, Babel's *Red Cavalry* and Dmitrii Furmanov's *Chapaev*. Finally, Marietta Chudakova's contribution traces the allusions in Babel's unique stylistic idiom to immediate prerevolutionary Russian literature and, subsequently, the "thinning and diluting" of Babel's own stylistic idiosyncrasies in the work of Babel's contemporaries.

Part Three, "Babel in the World of Letters and On Stage," is a pastiche of six articles, which could have been further subdivided into more focused and less expansive sections. Essays by Robert Alter, Alexander Zholkovsky, and Zsuzsa Hetenyi consider Babel's work in the context of works by other writers: Flaubert's aestheticization of ugliness, "debut" narratives by Nabokov, Chekhov, and Sholem Aleichem, and childhood narratives of Henry Roth, respectively. An essay by Carl Weber, an internationally renowned theater director and a professor of Drama at Stanford, recounts his work with Stanford students on the production of Babel's late play *Maria* (the subject of Freidin's essay) that ran during the Babel conference in 2004. In addition to Batuman's contribution that addresses the relationship between "clerk and writer, mimesis and imitatio" (p. 162) in the fiction of Babel (as well as Proust and Cervantes), Efraim Sicher rounds out the volume with an essay on Jewish intertextuality in Babel's work, such as comparison of Babel's prose to the work of Odessa-born modernist Hebrew poet Bialik.

In addition to a volume edited by Harold Bloom in 1985 (*Isaac Babel*) and the recent Norton Critical Edition of Babel's work (edited by Gregory Freidin, 2010), *The Enigma of Isaac Babel* is sure to become an invaluable addition to the bookshelves of scholars of Isaac Babel and, given Babel's centrality in Russian letters, of Russian literature and culture more broadly.

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