

THE SHORTLIST

Memoirs

By Sarah Wildman

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MESS**One Man's Struggle to Clean Up His House and His Act**

By Barry Yourgrau

276 pp. Norton, \$25.95.

Can clutter be glorious? Somewhere between the stuff of freak-show reality television (homes built like prairie-dog warrens, stacked high with newspapers and egg cartons) and Freud's carefully curated collections lies the apartment of Barry Yourgrau, who is tenuously balanced between hoarder and collector. His place is neither presentable nor truly horrifying, and yet it is closed to public view. It has become a source of insurmountable shame.

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Inspired by his embarrassment (and spurred on by his girlfriend, an easily identified food and travel writer whose pseudonyms throughout the book get a bit too cute), Yourgrau sets out to understand the literal and emotional weight of the objects we save. He is both subject and flâneur in this intimate world — and a gorgeous writer (a hoarder's home “didn't ‘reek’; it was high-pitched and punky, intimately piercing. Like the whole place was one long-moldering ancient intimate flesh”). Wherever readers find themselves on his spectrum, there is much to recognize about how much sentimentality is wrapped up in the totems of our pasts.

GIRL IN THE WOODS**A Memoir**

By Aspen Matis

372 pp. Morrow/HarperCollins, \$24.99.

Pilgrimage is a time-honored motif, and it should not be surprising to see another memoir of a woman finding herself on the Pacific Crest Trail, the 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada traversed in part, and memorably so, by Cheryl Strayed in “Wild.” But though the trail is the same, Matis takes an entirely different journey, tormented and driven by different traumas. Raped on her second night at college, she is bewildered by her

campus's dismissive reaction, as well as her own shame. She leaves school and seeks solace in solitude. But Matis is never truly alone; she enters into relationships on her journey, and her parents bear down upon her. She seems to be fleeing them even as they fund her trip and stock her with shoes, gear and a satellite phone.

This is a younger, angrier book than "Wild." The story is raw and immediate (if occasionally overwritten), and it isn't just a reckoning with trauma but also a reckoning with the self and an embrace of self-reliance. It's easy to imagine Matis becoming a hero to young women trying to find a means of navigating adulthood.

READING CLAUDIUS

A Memoir in Two Parts

By Caroline Heller

296 pp. Dial, \$27.

The intellectual world of prewar Prague, much like that of Vienna and Berlin, was filled with idealistic, secular Jews captivated by a world of ideas and the words of Kafka and Goethe. Many who descend from this generation have spent lifetimes imagining this world as it teetered on the edge of destruction.

Heller sets her memoir at the very point that fantasy meets reality and the lived experience of her Holocaust-survivor parents and uncle. Rather than recounting her family's stories, she tells them as her own: the disastrous love affair between her mother and her uncle (the brother of the man her mother went on to marry), and her father's six painful years in German concentration camps. The book recalls Erich Maria Remarque's "Flotsam," in its ability to evoke the tremendous emotion of a disintegrating community.

Ultimately, it is Heller's own story, which brackets the wartime tales, that is too broadly drawn. We miss out on the chance to know her better. But this fine book contains moments of emotion so pure that in the end, we too fall in love with the writer's past.

BETWEEN GODS

A Memoir

By Alison Pick

380 pp. Harper Perennial, paper, \$15.99.

Truth came to the poet and novelist Pick incrementally, through childhood. The knowledge was confirmation of a long-held suspicion: Pick's paternal grandparents fled wartime Czechoslovakia for Canada and, upon learning their families had been murdered, suppressed their Jewish identities.

As the book opens, Pick, raised Christian, knows shockingly little about Judaism — nothing of the Sabbath (though she has on her own observed a time of quiet each week), nothing of the texts or the laws. Nothing of the joy. Over time she separates her obsession with the annihilation of half her family from her pursuit of God and community in the present, a spiritual awakening that coincides with her marriage and impending motherhood.

Pick is a marvelous scene writer, and she vividly recreates the transformation of her relationships — with her fiancé, her new friends, her new teachers. Her path to conversion — complicated, nearly thwarted — is deeply moving in its culmination. Ultimately, this layered look at identity is a call for claiming one's true self.

TRANS

A Memoir

By Juliet Jacques

311 pp. Verso, \$26.95.

“Is this how other people feel?” Jacques wonders, 15 months into hormone therapy and the Orwellian-named Real Life Experience, a British National Health Service requirement to live publicly as a woman before surgical transition. “This lightness, unburdened by that disconnect between body and mind?” Jacques’s memoir toggles between her transition and broader considerations of trans theory and representation, but it is her personal coming-of-age story that is the most powerful and engaging.

Jacques rejects some common narratives for trans men and women — especially the idea of “being trapped in the wrong body” — and pointedly turns the prurient interest in “before” and “after” images of trans people back upon the reader, even while sharing intimate moments.

She is conscious, too, of the discomfort and responsibility of being part of the vanguard, especially at a time of intense media attention. She rejects heroism, but it’s hard not to see her as anything other than brave, even as she pushes readers to recognize that what is revolutionary is the very ordinariness of her day-to-day life.