

Russian aristocrats engaged in the eternal “mating game” in the midst of the history in which they find themselves immersed.

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Stanton, Rebecca Jane. *Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012. xii + 205 pp. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8101-2832-3.

Rebecca Stanton’s stimulating book takes as its terrain a group of writers, born in the 1890s, who have in common an identification with the city of Odessa and an approach to first-person narrative that problematizes the border between truth and fiction. As the book’s title indicates, Isaac Babel, the most prominent of these writers, is the focal point: two of the four chapters (chaps. 2 and 3) are devoted to stories that belong to his ostensibly autobiographical cycle *The Story of My Dovecote*. This central part of the book is preceded by a chapter (“City through the Looking Glass: Literary Odessa”) that provides a history of Odessa as a literary image and explains how this image is reshaped in Babel’s definition of his literary project. Having contextualized Babel, Stanton goes on in the second half of chapter 1 to delineate the features of what she terms “Odessan Modernism”: a carnivalesque “aesthetic inversion or subversion of conventional dichotomies and hierarchies” (p. 33); the use of a trickster figure; a sense of “exilic anxiety and nostalgic longing” (p. 37); and a tendency to “rogishly manipulate the boundaries of autobiographical discourse” (p. 41).

From the introduction (“Stories That Come True”) onward, Stanton pursues the argument that works of fiction—especially first-person narratives—can so fully command the reader’s credulity that they come to be understood as being true. The works of the Odessan modernists, she argues, are particularly striking examples of this phenomenon. The intricate play between fiction and authenticity that a given short story can set in motion is analyzed with intensity and persuasive power in chapter 2, “Isaac Babel: Stories That Lie Like Truth.” Two stories—“Childhood: At Grandmother’s” and “The Story of My Dovecote”—are examined here, with particular attention to the storytellers within them and their pretensions to credibility. This close reading is the strongest part of the book; the treatment of Great-Uncle Shoyl, builder of the dovecote and fabricator of stories, is especially well done.

The discussion continues in chapter 3, “Babel’s Bildungsroman and Odessan Modernism,” with a study of three other stories—“First Love,” “In the Basement,” and “Awakening”—that also raise questions about “the aesthetic qualities, epistemological status, and ethical boundaries of fiction” (p. 74). Stanton analyzes the texts with sensitivity and imagination (her interpretive judgments may not all be persuasive, but they are always thought-provoking). Her argument, that events seen by the protagonist through the window in “First Love” could be understood as tinged with fantasy, is productive, as is Stanton’s analogy to the realm beyond the windows in the paintings of Chagall. In the final part of the chapter, Stanton briefly looks beyond the five stories that she includes in Babel’s *bildungsroman* and touches on their relation to other stories that Babel wrote in the pseudo-autobiographical mode, as well as to the *Odessa Tales*. One wishes that she had expanded this discussion to include even more of Babel’s oeuvre, particularly those stories that extend his narrator’s story beyond Odessa and into the Soviet era.

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