

# Matthew Gavin Frank

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## About this Person

**Born:** November 25, 1976 in Chicago, Illinois, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Occupation:** Writer

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## PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born November 25, 1976, in Chicago, IL; married. **Education:** Arizona State University, M.F.A.

**Addresses:** Home: MI. Agent: Rayhane Sanders, WSK Literary Management, 888 7th Ave., Ste. 503, New York, NY 10106.

## CAREER:

Writer, chef, and writing teacher. Has also worked as a sommelier and menu planner. Grand Valley State University, Allendale Charter Township, MI, creative writing teacher; Northern Michigan University, Marquette, assistant professor. Also taught members of the military and their families near Fort Drum, NY.

## AWARDS:

Illinois Arts Council Fellowship; Vermont Studio Center Artist's Grant; Sonoran Prize for Poetry; grants from the Virginia G. Piper Center for the Creative Arts.

## WORKS:

## WRITINGS:

- *Barolo* (memoir), University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln, NE), 2010.
- *Warranty in Zulu* (poems), Barrow Street Press (New York, NY), 2010.
- *Pot Farm* (memoir), University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln, NE), 2012.
- *Preparing the Ghost: An Essay Concerning the Giant Squid and Its First Photographer* (nonfiction), Liveright (New York, NY), 2012.
- *The Mad Feast: An Ecstatic Tour through America's Food* (nonfiction), Liveright (New York, NY), 2015.

Also author of the poetry collections *The Morrow Plots* and *Sagittarius Agitprop*. Author of the poetry chapbooks *Four Hours to Mpumalanga* and *Aardvark*.

Contributor to anthologies, including *The Best Food Writing* and *The Best Travel Writing*.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Iowa Review*, *North American Review*, *Pleiades*, *New Republic*, *Field*, *Epoch*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Indiana Review*. Hybrid editor of *Passages North*.

## Sidelights

Matthew Gavin Frank is a writer, chef, poet, and writing teacher. He has spent several years working in the food industry planning menus for celebrities, cooking, and even serving as a sommelier. Frank has written two poetry collections, *The Morrow Plots* and *Sagittarius Agitprop*, and his chapbooks include *Four Hours to Mpumalanga* and *Aardvark*. Frank is widely published in anthologies and periodicals, such as *The Best Food Writing* and *The Best Travel Writing*, and the *Iowa Review*, *North American Review*, *Pleiades*, *New Republic*, *Field*, *Epoch*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Indiana Review*. For his work Frank has been honored with an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, a Vermont Studio Center Artist's Grant, the Sonoran Prize for Poetry, and several grants from the Virginia G. Piper Center for the Creative Arts.

In the 2010 volume *Barolo*, Frank offers readers a memoir of his work on an Italian vineyard. He writes of his early love for food, which led to his restaurant career, and a life-changing trip to Italy that left him determined to return. For that return, Frank went to live in Barolo, an area famous for its eponymous wine. He stayed in a tent in a local's garden and worked (technically as an illegal immigrant) as a grape picker at one of Barolo's best vineyards. Frank discusses his experiences there, the food he ate, the people he met, and the wine he drank. He places his experience in the context of the region's history, and also regales readers with his fondness for another local specialty, the Alba truffle.

Reviewers responded to *Barolo* with praise, noting that Frank is a lively and humorous writer. Mark Knoblauch, writing in *Booklist*, commended the memoir, explaining: "Besides conveying the sensuality of the place, Frank offers insight into the region's history." Another positive assessment was offered by Sue Young on the *Chicago Tribune Blog*, when she declared that "the author is completely and madly smitten with Italy, wine-making and food. His descriptions of all three are ... humorous and written with obvious passion and love."

Frank followed the success of *Barolo* with the poetry collection *Warranty in Zulu* and a second memoir, *Pot Farm*. Like *Barolo*, *Pot Farm* is centered on Frank's adventures in harvesting, albeit for a slightly different crop. After Frank and his wife spent a year caring for Frank's mother as she died of cancer, they headed together to harvest marijuana on a farm in Northern California. Although the farm complied with state regulations for medical marijuana cultivation, Frank notes that the farm he worked on, and others like it, are still subject to local and federal raids. These raids have resulted in death, even when farm workers have been cooperative. Farms are also susceptible to thieves, and Frank thus describes an atmosphere of fear. The farm was surrounded by high walls and guarded by snipers. Frank and his crew members were locked in as well, and they were not allowed to communicate with the outside world, lest they tip off law enforcement or would-be thieves. The author also reflects on his mother's death and smoking marijuana to help him through his grief. The farm's owner, a colorful woman called Lady Wanda, is profiled as well. Frank often addresses the reader directly in *Pot Farm*, meditating on the reliability of memory as he does so.

The author told *Inside Higher Ed* Web site interviewer John Warner that what he did not want to do was "write a memoir about my mother's battle with cancer" and the impact that experience had on himself and his wife. "I was more interested in exploring the often-clandestine everyday goings-on at the medical marijuana farm--the fantastic, the mundane, the dangerous." However, he admitted that he had to fill in the backstory of why he and his wife would choose to spend time in what was sometimes a dangerous place. While writing the third draft of his book, he finally admitted that his

memory of events on the farm was not always accurate. "I became interested in using disclaimer and a 'cloak of unreliability' to get away with something. To allow myself to speculate." Frank added: "I want *Pot Farm* to be lyrical nonfiction coupled with immersion travel writing and legislative fact. I want the book ... to not only allow for the faults of memory, but also ... to turn up the heat beneath such faults, inflame them, bring them to the surface and engage them--and such a breaking-of-the-fourth-wall engagement is coupled with both the personal narrative and research, so the book simultaneously becomes memoir, lyric essay, a series of research-based information, and a discussion of craft."

Critical reception of this device was laudatory, with a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor describing the memoir as "investigative research coupled with personal reflections on a controversial arena of American farm production." Kyrille Goldbeck DeBose, writing in *Library Journal*, was also impressed, explaining that while some readers may dislike the "blunt, crude language and descriptions ... others will relish his dark humor in recounting interactions."

In *Preparing the Ghost: An Essay Concerning the Giant Squid and Its First Photographer*, Frank profiles Moses Harvey, a resident of Newfoundland, Canada, who photographed a giant squid in 1874. He tells of the myths surrounding the squid and takes readers through Harvey's interactions with the creature.

Jon Mooallem, a critic on the *New York Times Book Review* Web site, noted that Frank writes "ambitiously and often with contagious glee." Mooallem concluded: "It's hard to imagine a better book about not entirely understanding giant squids." Writing on the *Wall Street Journal* Web site, William Girdaldi commented: "*Preparing the Ghost* delights in a banquet of unusual facts and fantastists. The subplot about Mr. Frank's grandfather might be a longueur, and the reveries on ice cream impossible to connect to the kraken mania of Moses Harvey, but elsewhere Mr. Frank marshals irresistible information--the evolution of calamari as a popular dish, the uses of ambergris--along with pressing philosophical queries and excerpts from scholars. These elements coalesce to give this book a charming dynamism." A *California Bookwatch* contributor described the volume as "a lively, involving saga of obsession, myth, and scientific reality," and a critic in *Kirkus Reviews* called it "fantastical, atmospherically moody, and Poe-like in its laudanum-fueled dreaminess." "Frank's prose modulates its moods in this dynamically idiosyncratic, deep-diving, and provocative inquiry," asserted Donna Seaman in *Booklist*.

*The Mad Feast: An Ecstatic Tour through America's Food* finds Frank recalling his journey across the United States to examine regional foods. He discusses the barbeque in South Carolina, Iowa's loose-meat sandwich, and the marionberries of Oregon, among other foods. Frank also includes trivia about locations he visits.

"Frank's feast isn't so much mad as madcap, trying to do too many things at once," remarked a critic in *Publishers Weekly*. Other assessments of the book were more favorable. *Library Journal* writer Devon Thomas noted: "Best to be read in small doses, this is a unique, fascinating offering." A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* commented: "Although Frank's riffs occasionally recall Gertrude Stein's dizzyingly obscure *Tender Buttons*, overall, he's produced a surprising, entertaining look at what Americans eat and why."

FURTHER READINGS:

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

### BOOKS

- o Frank, Matthew Gavin, *Barolo*, University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln, NE), 2010.
- o Frank, Matthew Gavin, *Pot Farm*, University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln, NE), 2012.

## PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, April 15, 2010, Mark Knoblauch, review of *Barolo*, p. 14; July 1, 2014, Donna Seaman, review of *Preparing the Ghost: An Essay Concerning the Giant Squid and Its First Photographer*, p. 11.
- *California Bookwatch*, September, 2014, review of *Preparing the Ghost*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, January 1, 2012, review of *Pot Farm*; June 1, 2014, review of *Preparing the Ghost*; August 15, 2015, review of *The Mad Feast: An Ecstatic Tour through America's Food*.
- *Library Journal*, June 1, 2012, Kyrille Goldbeck DeBose, review of *Pot Farm*, p. 118; November 15, 2015, Devon Thomas, review of *The Mad Feast*, p. 100.
- *Publishers Weekly*, April 21, 2014, review of *Preparing the Ghost*, p. 66; August 31, 2015, review of *The Mad Feast*, p. 76.

## ONLINE

- *Chicago Tribune Blog*, <http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/> (July 28, 2010), Sue Young, review of *Barolo*.
- *Inside Higher Ed*, <http://www.insidehighered.com/> (February 22, 2012), John Warner, author interview.
- *Matthew Gavin Frank Home Page*, <http://matthewgfrank.com> (August 4, 2016).
- *New York Times Book Review Online*, <http://www.nytimes.com/> (July 11, 2014), Jon Mooallem, review of *Preparing the Ghost*.
- *Wall Street Journal Online*, <http://www.wsj.com/> (July 3, 2014), William Giraldi, review of *Preparing the Ghost*.\*

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