



Double Vision: A Self-Portrait

Walter Abish

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Does one ever escape from the family? How much do we understand about our own past? How do we come to be who we are?

Walter Abish, the internationally acclaimed author of *How German Is It*, examines these questions through the prism of his own experience, and confronts and encapsulates the historic upheavals of the mid-twentieth century in this brilliant, deceptively simple, and quietly wrenching account of his two journeys.

The first begins in Vienna, where Abish was born in the 1930s in the Jewish, but not-too-Jewish, household of a prosperous perfumer. Then it ricochets around the world as his parents flee first to France (his mother had to sneak alone across the Italian border), then to war-torn Shanghai under Japanese occupation, just ahead of Mao's army, then to Israel.

Incapable of understanding his family's desperate situation, Abish as a boy creates his own private world, filtering out precarious and terrifying realities.

Abish describes fantastic events in the coolest tones. In precise, haunting detail, he records the perceptions of a child who registers and remembers what he will only later understand. He writes of the day in the park when a stranger suddenly screams "Jews out!" and he and his frail grandmother run for the exit in a panic as the other children and grandmothers stand and watch; the day his father is released by the Gestapo because a man in the room owes him money that he has never tried to collect and says, "Let Abish go—he's okay"; of the time his father speaks to him about inheriting his perfume business, as they stand on the deck of a ship bound for China.

The first journey recounts the flight; the second journey chronicles the return: Abish writes about how, in the 1980s, he went on a tour to Germany to launch the translation of his award-winning novel *How German Is It*—a book he wrote without ever having set foot there, deliberately, because he wished to elicit the idea of Germanness in what was "a fantasy of Germany." This tour of what to him is an unfamiliar society includes a side trip to Vienna, where he glimpses the life he might have experienced and has the horrifying feeling that he never left.

Double Vision is a book that cuts to the quick. With unflinching candor, humor, and affection, Abish re-creates the way it feels to be a child and to look at your parents and wonder who they are. To be an adult and catch them in every corner of your personality. To look back on the world of your youth and realize both what you noticed and what you missed. It is a stunning achievement.

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