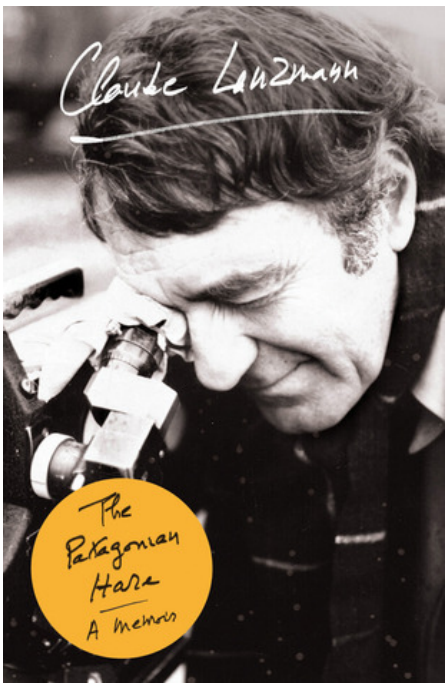

The Patagonian Hare: A Memoir

Claude Lanzmann , Frank Wynne (Translation)

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"Even if I lived a hundred lives, I still wouldn't be exhausted." These words capture the intensity of the experiences of Claude Lanzmann, a man whose acts have always been a negation of resignation: a member of the Resistance at sixteen, a friend to Jean-Paul Sartre and a lover to Simone de Beauvoir, and the director of one of the most important films in the history of cinema, *Shoah*.

In these pages, Lanzmann composes a hymn to life that flows from memory yet has the rhythm of a novel, as tumultuous as it is energetic. *The Patagonian Hare* is the story of a man who has searched at every moment for existential adventure, who has committed himself deeply to what he believes in, and who has made his life a battle.

The Patagonian Hare, a number-one bestseller in France, has been translated into Spanish, German, Italian, Hebrew, Polish, Dutch, and Portuguese. Claude Lanzmann's brilliant memoir has been widely acclaimed as a masterpiece, was hailed as "a true literary and historic event" in the pages of *Le Monde*, and was awarded the prestigious Welt-Literaturpreis in Germany.

The Patagonian Hare: A Memoir Details

Date	:	Published March 13th 2012 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (first published 2009)
ISBN	:	9780374230043
Author	:	Claude Lanzmann , Frank Wynne (Translation)
Format	:	Hardcover 544 pages
Genre	:	Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Cultural, France, Biography, World War II, Holocaust

From Reader Review The Patagonian Hare: A Memoir for online ebook

François says

Indrukwekkend werk, vooral rond het maken van zijn documentaire Shoa.

Simone says

Claude Lanzmann is a French filmaker and genius. Claude Lanzmann certainly thinks so. While he's led an undeniably rich and interesting life, and was good friends with a number of fascinating and famous intellectuals and public figures, the over-riding, ego-maniacal self-regard was KILLING me. Life is short. I had to put this down half-way through. Sorry, Claude.

Alienor says

This is not a book to lightly put aside.
It should be thrown with great force.
Against a roomful of shredders
Above a vat of acid

I read it a few years ago in an agony of conflict - I wanted to like it, I wanted to know more. I was traveling and my bag was heavy, and after a few hundred pages I had determined I HATED the writer. I wanted to destroy the book, but it's against my religion. And I had to know where OTHER characters ended up. I ended up finishing it quickly, in apnea.

Interesting times, fascinating people, the breath of history, the presence of art... But of all the insufferable, name-dropping, self-aggrandizing assholes, I think Claude Lanzman deserves a crown. Everyone, including his own sister is a stepladder to him. His lover is never 'Simone', oh no, but SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, in case you missed that he banged a literary legend. He has the soul of a pimp, his heart shriveled and dead, only caring for the gilding on top. Ah, to admire a work of art (NOT this book) and to despise its author - it seems to be my fate. As also to abhor what others seem to put on the highest pedestals. Oh well.

Read only if you can stand suffocating egomaniac writers.

Mary Goodnight says

L'histoire d'une vie unique et multiple... Magistrale, l'autobiographie de Claude Lanzmann donne à voir une époque révolue, un âge d'or de la pensée et de la vie intellectuelle ; un monde pré-mondialisation où tous les voyages se muaient en aventures, en expériences à même d'ébranler l'individu au plus profond de lui-même. Lanzmann, aventurier des "Temps modernes", a grandi, aux côtés de Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir, dans ce terreau qui lui donnera, plus tard, les armes pour réaliser son oeuvre-monstre, "Shoah", à laquelle il a

consacré 12 ans de sa vie, 12 ans où, pour lui, le temps s'est arrêté, comme figé devant une horreur qu'il - il le confesse - a eu parfois du mal à appréhender. Dans les passionnantes dernières pages de l'ouvrage, il montre comment, par la force du "no comment" et d'un montage pensé dans le moindre détail, et malgré les péripéties d'une réalisation chaotique, il a réussi à montrer l'indicible... sans le dire. Un grand livre.

Chasc says

L'auteur a beau avoir fait des trucs incroyables et mené une vie très riche, je le trouve surtout très mesquin et égocentrique (mais c'est peut-être nécessaire pour écrire des mémoires) de régler ses comptes ainsi, 20ans après certains faits et après la morts de certains de ses adversaires/ennemis.

Heather says

Claude Lanzmann knows how to get a reader's attention: the first sentence of the first chapter of his memoir (originally published in French in 2009) is this: "The guillotine – more generally, capital punishment and the various methods of meting out death – has been the abiding obsession of my life" (1). He goes on to talk about seeing a film featuring a scene with a guillotine when he was a child, how it stayed with him: how later, as an adult, he paid attention to executions: "I compelled myself to anticipate or relive the last moments […] of the condemned men," he says (3). He's concerned with the moments of "the irreversible," "the irreparable" (4, 8). This all ties in, of course, to the work for which he's best known—*Shoah*—of which he says this: "it is not about the point of departure but about the last leg of the journey, the last junction, when it is too late, when what cannot be undone is about to be done" (513).

But meanwhile, there's been a whole lot of stuff in Lanzmann's life, between his birth in 1925 and this book's writing in 2009, and the book is wonderfully full of so much experience. I like how *interesting* so much of it is: whether he's talking about being a passenger in an Israeli army F-16 in his 60s or harvesting grapes in the south of France at age 14, or talking about paintings (El Greco, Goya), Lanzmann makes me want to pay attention. There are some slow stretches (I wasn't as interested in the sections about fighting in the Resistance—ambushes, weapons, convoys—or the section about visiting Egypt then Israel just before the Six Day War), but mostly I was entranced by Lanzmann's story, and by his wonderful long sentences: like this, when he's talking about a painting by Goya:

> But one would be wrong to think these legless men are trying to defend themselves; their chief concern is killing, and the resolve of each consciousness to secure the other's death is so primal that – and this is the excruciating lesson of the painting – there can be no master, no slave, no victor and no vanquished, but since neither values life over death, only two bloody, battered, twisted corpses lying dead beneath a great dark luminous sky of dread, the sky of Aragon or of Castile with its flashes of turquoise peeping through the dense black clouds. (30)

That idea, the idea of valuing life over death, is also clearly part of the story of the survivors who speak in *Shoah*, and is another one of Lanzmann's big concerns: he talks, at the end of the book, about "incarnation," about "wild joy," about a sense of life, and that, and the way that he captures it, is a big part of the book's appeal (527-528).

Also excellent are the stories of Lanzmann's various amorous adventures: going out walking with his stepfather to learn how to seduce ladies with words, having an older married lover, being taken to a brothel for the first time by his father and stepfather, loving and living with Simone de Beauvoir, vacationing with her and Sartre, seducing/being seduced by a nurse in North Korea despite their lack of a common language: there are moments where bits of it feel like picaresque swagger, but mostly it reads as pure delight in life. The sections about travel capture this too, in passages like this, about Lanzmann's first trip to Italy:

> I was intensely excited, the connecting of names with places, the names of stations fleetingly glimpsed in the darkness – Brig, Simplon, Domodossola, Stresa – all attested to the truth of the world, merging language and reality, poignantly revealing the truth. (178-179).

This theme repeats, too, when Lanzmann talks about the making of *Shoah*, about going to Poland and being staggered by the continued existence of Treblinka: the village alongside the extermination camp, the village that was there when the camp was active, the peasants who were there when the camp was active. There's also a great bit about the past becoming present in a passage about buying postcards of the Bund in pre-Communist China from a hawker in Shanghai, and more of that same sensation on Lanzmann's second trip to North Korea, when he tries to revisit the sites of his decades-past unconsummated affair with that nurse. Sometimes this sense that the past is still present leads to sections that feel like settling old scores or trying to have the last word, but the annoyance I felt at those sections was small compared to my interest in the rest.

Judy says

(A slightly altered version of this review can be found at BookBrowse if you are a member there.)

When I was offered the opportunity to review Claude Lanzmann's memoir for BookBrowse, I jumped at the chance though I had never before heard his name. Just the fact that he was one of Simone de Beauvoir's lovers compelled my interest. Before reading The Patagonian Hare I added to my reading on Beauvoir by devouring Tete A Tete by Hazel Rowley, as well as the second volume of Beauvoir's memoirs, The Prime of Life. As readers of this blog know, I am a complete Beauvoir geek. As I write this I am still feverishly reading the third Beauvoir memoir, The Force of Circumstance. As it turns out, the story of Lanzmann in her life is covered in this third volume. Now I have read about the only man she actually lived with.

Still I was somehow innocently unaware of the formidable impact Lanzmann's memoir would have on me. Jean-Paul Sartre, some say the best-known philosopher of the 20th century, has also been called the father of Existentialism. I am not qualified to explain the tenants of Sartre, but he, Beauvoir and Claude Lanzmann took this philosophy to the page, to the bedroom, to the streets, and ultimately to the world, each in their own unique ways. Reading about the life of Claude Lanzmann in his own words was a 528-page lesson in how to be an existentialist. In fact, it was more like an infusion than a lesson.

Besides having been a brave soldier, a tireless traveler and mountain climber, a lover to many women, and a person who has lived his beliefs, he is a consummate writer. His energy and passions literally leap from the page. Never is this memoir about overcoming anything, though he suffered many sorrows and hardships. It is at once a joyous, sobering, relentless testament to Sartre's statement in Being and Nothingness: "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."

In approximately chronological order, Lanzmann accounts for his life, though most chapters range far into the future with the further results and outcomes of a certain adventure. This pattern was disconcerting at times though he always brought me back to where he started. Truthfully there is probably no better way to make sense of such a full and complex life. The first chapter is meant to give the raison d'etre for Lanzmann's obsessions though I did not understand how or why until the very last chapter.

Nevertheless, like any great novel, the arc of his life story plays out, from his involvement with the French Resistance during WWII while still a teenager, to finishing his degree in philosophy and finally meeting Sartre and Beauvoir, to becoming a journalist and traveling to Israel in 1952, to China and North Korea in 1958, and to Algeria in 1959 during that country's long war for independence.

The World War II years were undoubtedly the worst time in the history of the world to be Jewish, not that it has ever been easy, but Lanzmann was not raised as a practicing Jew. His passion was for freedom and for life, his abhorrence for anything that resembled oppression. It was in Israel that he found his life's true work and became a film maker, culminating in the nine and a half hour documentary Shoah, an approach to the Holocaust which explores "death itself, death rather than survival."

As part of my homework, I watched Shoah, now available on DVD. Its somber power builds, hour by hour, and is like nothing else I have read or watched about the attempted annihilation of the Jews by Hitler. The extremities connected with making the film and the controversy it unleashed take up the final chapters of Lanzmann's life story. To understand how a passion for life became an obsession with the deaths of millions of Jews but how neither passion nor obsession have ever slowed the man, you will have to take his journey with him. He is not a humble person; he apologizes for nothing. By the last past I was fine with that.

Mishehu says

What a life! The bulk of this memoir is both extraordinary and exceptionally well crafted. Lanzmann is a superb writer and a very deep thinker. He is also, not surprisingly, a bit of a narcissist. Stretches of this book are self-congratulatory in ways I found grating. But the exceptional portions outnumber (and outweigh) their opposite, and the memoir ends even more powerfully (and searingly) than it begins. (And it begins very powerfully.) In all a very substantial read, and a rewarding one.

Ralph says

The TLS called Claude Lanzmann "one of the last towering intellectuals of post-war France." He writes like a dream, and has done all those things you and I wish we could be able to do while we were still able. He is now eighty-six years old, and this is his superb biography, as published originally in French three years ago.

He taught himself to climb the Alps and ski. He joined the resistance in Clermont-Ferrand and fought in the maquis until 1945. He trained himself as a journalist, befriended the stars (and the stars of French philosophy) and the list of people whom he has known or continues to know is way up there in smarts and fame. As a journalist he also got to write anything he wanted (he was editor of Les Temps Modernes).

He was lover to Simone de Beauvoir for seven years and friend of Sartre (at the same time that Sartre was lover to de Beauvoir). Ah the French. He knew Cocteau, Simone Signoret, Marcel Marceau, Sophia Loren,

Judith Magree, Mitterand, Giacometti, Pompidou, Costeau --- and he met and interviewed Ben-Gurion, Ariel Sharon, Kim Il-Sung of Korea and Chen Yi of China.

He has had a dozen lady friends to kill for (and to love). With these he joins in that complex of artists, philosophers, stars, movers and shakers, iconoclasts, introverts, trouble-makers, trouble-seekers and the purely troubled that makes the intellectual life of France so bedeviling, if not fascinating. He married rich, flew constantly around the world on behalf of "causes," interviewed anyone he wanted, and in the meantime got to be a boulevardier on the streets of Paris ... eating great meals, thinking great thoughts, inventing great projects.

We bloodless Brits do envy all that, don't we? The tiny cafés, the glass or two of wine, the aroma of garlic and sawdust and Galoise, the confidence of being not only at the center of one of the great cultures of the world, but having that world in a jug. And you hold the cork.

§ § §

Lanzmann tells us "I have a naturally epic writing style." You can say that again. He started off as a philosopher and traded that in on journalism. Like most journalists (at least those whom are looking for readers), his writing is alert and punchy ... and everything is going somewhere. No noodling around here.

Whether he is writing about smuggling guns in 1940s Nazi-occupied France, almost drowning in the surf off Alexandria, making love to this or that princess, eating (and sleeping with) de Beauvoir while Sartre writes next door, getting lost in the massifs of Switzerland, having the Communists take out a contract on him ...

... in all of this there comes a breathtaking feeling of we-are-there and he-may-not-get-out-of-it alive. And the undercurrent, the Lanzmann-set: what I am doing right now is the most important thing in the world; if I don't do it now, and if I don't it right, all will be lost. No small potatoes here. Every one of Lanzmann's adventures has the feel of ultimate import.

There is a danger in this for all concerned. David Bromwich writing in a recent issue of the LRB speaks of Obama's similar sense of personal (and world) drama:

It is dangerous for a person ... to regard every action as significant. It means that you consider yourself an embodiment of a symbolic purpose which floats free of the content of actions; a purpose that requires any disturbing break to be viewed in the light of an as yet undisclosed terminus.

§ § §

It is this kinetic force that makes a reader like me stay up until three in the morning with this book. I have to get up to go to work soon, I can't stay up any longer with this, just ten more pages before I shut it down, please ... until one gets quite sick of being seduced by such a bold, gracious, I've-done-it-all lug.

"I would like to spend an hour with this son-of-a-bitch," we think, and then: the switch, as Lanzmann tells us, so wrongheadedly, about the time he began to surmise that the only leg some of us have to stand on is status: To lose one's status could result in being abandoned by all one's friends, that there comes a moment when no one will help you, that it is possible to die of starvation, of cold, of loneliness, I was extraordinarily sensitive to anything that, to my eyes, concerned naked necessity, anything that exposed the violence underpinning all human relationships.

What nonsense!

§ § §

Those of us who grew up feeding on the Existentialists will be in our glory here, for we get to spend quality time with Sartre and de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir! Sartre and Lanzmann call her Castor, and here she is in a snit, ones "that never were associated with some wrong done to her nor some misfortune."

It translated into an utterly unpredictable explosion. Sitting, standing, or lying down, in the car or on foot, in public or in private, she would burst into violent, convulsive sobs, her whole body wracked with gasps, with heartrending cries punctuated by long howls of incommunicable despair.

Lanzmann would "try to comfort her" but

nothing worked, the convulsive overpowering dread had to progress through every stage until, after a considerable time she would manage to calm herself, but always at the cost of an acute, excruciating awareness of the fragility of human happiness.

There is a wonderful moment in which he explains how it all started with her, and memory, and he then spins a tribute to memory that only a French intellectual could bring off: "Simone de Beauvoir has already described how our love affair began. She did it her way, I will do it in mine: we don't remember the same things, which is normal."

§ § §

And then there is Sartre. The most fetching passage has to do with Sartre's decision that he must seduce Lanzmann's lovely sister Évelyne.

Sartre's enemies, according to Lanzmann, thought him exceedingly ugly, with his squint, and size, and they "caricatured him as a toad, a gnome, some sordid, baleful creature." Lanzmann sees it differently:

Sartre had everything it took to seduce Évelyne, complimenting her, his reasons articulate, cogent and neatly strung together. Watching this formidable thinking machine at work, the well-oiled gears and pistons revving until it was at full throttle, left you stunned with admiration, all the more so if the goal of his implacable passionate logic was to flatter you.

This is what immediately engages one about Lanzmann: his ability to cock his eye, see things a little differently than you or I would. Sartre will successfully seduce Évelyne, and then dump her ... causing immense pain. And Lanzmann watches the whole process with a benign delight.

§ § §

Once years ago, when I hung out with Famous People, one of my friends somehow landed an interview with Sartre. What he saw were not "the well-oiled gears and pistons," but, rather, the writer's addiction to speed. Sartre told him that when he was walking down the street he was always accompanied by two lobsters, one behind him to his left, the other to the right.

At the time, Corydrane was his drug of choice, which Lanzmann tells us would switch on for Sartre

a sun inside by head ... [and] he needed a huge sun and took fistfuls of Corydane, chewing them to a bitter paste, consciously ruining his health in the name of what he referred to as the 'full employment' of his brain.

Throughout The Patagonian Hare we find these exquisite asides being thrown in, popping up as one is reading along. Like Lanzmann's fascination with Leibnitz: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Or Lanzmann's meeting with Chen Yi, one of "the five great heroes of Chinese Communism, a survivor of the Long March."

Of the five hours I spent with him, my host devoted an unquantifiable but to my mind significant period of time to the ceremony of spitting: two large golden spittoons sat on side tables to the left and right of his armchair and, as the conversation led him to lean one way or the other, he dispatched the product of his expectorations with extraordinary precision, a Chinese method of pausing for thought.

Once Lanzmann ghost-wrote a book for Jacque-Yves Cousteau. "He was friendly but cold," he reports. As they worked on the book, Cousteau would read over his shoulder and say, "It's much too good ... It's not my style." After it was done and over with, "I ran into Cousteau several times after that: he never said hello, his long thin face was accustomed to surveying the horizon, and he simply did not notice me." Later in France-Soir, a letter was published, Cousteau to his wife, written in the spring of 1942: "Don't worry about the apartment, the Jews have all been swept up in the raids, we'll be spoilt for choice now."

§ § §

Much of the interest here will have to do with the making of Shoah --- the eight-hour documentary on concentration camps which took Lanzmann over ten years to conceive, produce, direct, finance, edit and finally get out to the world. He decided early on that he would use no archival film, and that --- most disturbing --- he would not only use survivors but track down and film some of the Germans and Poles who were actually doing the shipping, selecting, killing.

The story of finding six of them them and meeting with them and filming them and conning them is breath-taking. His technique consisted of his emphasizing that this was all for history, and that was his sole interest. When the words didn't work and he failed to get the interviews he wanted, he invented a way to use a special concealed Paluche camera, going into the homes of the few admitted Nazis he could find, interviewing them, all the while, rightly fearing being discovered.

In one filming in Ahrensburg he got fingered, some toughs came after them, and he and his companion dove out the door, raced to the car, zoomed out of a cul-de-sac almost being caught (and presumably, since his captors were trained killers, almost done in). Because Lanzmann is a professional film writer as well as director, his prose here turns brilliantly cinematic.

The best story of them all is the tale of him meeting with Henrik Gawkowski, one of the few Poles who agreed to be interviewed. His job at Treblinka was that of engineer of the train that transported the Jews to the station. Lanzmann being a contrarian (and a journalist) --- he ends up warming to Gawkowski, and, when meeting him, tells us, "I liked him immediately, I liked his child-like blue eyes still heavy with sleep, his air of innocence and loyalty, the lines of pain etched into his forehead, his evident kindness." Lanzmann is a charmer, and is, too, charmed, and soon enough, "I was the first person ever to question him; I had arrived in the night like a ghost, no one before me having troubled to hear what he had to say."

He went to fetch a bottle of the wonderful vodka drunk by Polish farmers, miraculous, blessed rot-gut, and after we had downed them, I ventured that we were famished. He and his wife bent over backwards,

ransacked a mesh-panelled meat-safe like the one my grandmother Anna had had, providing us with a cornucopia of food, of cold meats and bread and the vodka that unlocks mind and memory.

What a night I spent with Henrik! He proved to be devastatingly honest, he wept from the emotion, and doubtless the vodka. I myself had tears in my eyes and we hugged each other several times. I make no mention of this in Shoah, but the picture he painted of Treblinka and the surrounding villages during the thirteen months when the gassings were taking place defied any tale.

The oddest part of The Patagonia Rabbit has nothing to do with French philosophers, travels to China, climbing the massifs, trying to get France extricated from Algeria (and the generals), and getting through Shoah.

Rather, it's an odd little sidebar that goes on for an excessive number of pages ... a very odd bit about Kim Kum-sun. Who? She's a nurse. When Lanzmann arrives in North Korea, he's exhausted, is told he needs an injection of Vitamin B-12. Kim Kum-sun was "a stunning female nurse in her traditional dress, her breasts restrained but still visible beneath her smock, her long black hair in two plaints, her eyes slanting and aglow with fire, although she keeps them lowered."

From this shot in the ass comes a regular wild goose-chase. Lanzmann is determined that he will spend the night with her, even though he is for god's sakes in puritanical North Korea with "men in peaked caps" everywhere, all around them, watching any visitors, especially this restless Frenchman. Their conjoining is clearly a no-no.

For many pages we are immersed not in a political treatise of A Critical Visitor to North Korea, but a Keystone Kops drama with our hero acting the part of a besotted buffoon, dragging the not-unwilling Kim Kum-sun down the hall, out of the hotel, into the streets, over to a nearby lake. There they rent a boat and he tries to land them on an island where they can strip and act out what is considered to be a rather impure act in a very puritanical country.

They never make it: the no-diddling rules of that very peculiar nation-state are enforced with vigor and for once in this whole book, Lanzmann loses it. Which is probably why it entrances him so ... and the rest of us.

It is fine comic writing, but more interesting to this reader is the fact that underneath his exterior --- this alive, vital, fiercely intellectual neo-philosopher --- lives a lusty young kid who just can't keep it in his pants. He even, years later, returns to North Korea, which he hates, to see if he can track down and consummate this ridiculous tête-à-tête with our lovely young nurse.

It is this eccentric horseplay that helps to tip this book over from the merely interesting into the fascinating: a fascinating man who sees every thing he chooses to do as crucial, the end, the ultimate. This is a man of no little passion, following the nurse of his dreams. And blowing it. It's all very odd. And quite bewitching. As odd as his first criminal act. Which came about when he was a student in Paris.

He stole a book. And not any old book. "I only steal philosophy books," he writes. In the PUF bookstore, he passes over the volumes of Guéroult and Blondel and Lachièze-Rey. No: it has to be Jean Hyppolite, the two volumes of L'Évolution at la structure de la doctrine de la science chez Fichte.

When I was his age I was stealing Captain Marvel comic books ... or Sin City or I Can Get It for You Wholesale. And here's this French juvenile snitching two volumes of the philosopher Hyppolite. And getting nabbed for it.

But you know Paris, that den of intellectuals. Turns out that Hyppolite lives not far from Lanzmann's parents' apartment, and so the kid's step-father finds a lawyer, and the lawyer says that they might beat the rap if they can convince the philosopher to attest on his behalf, since "a guilty verdict would ipso facto lead to a criminal record, meaning I would be ineligible to matriculate at the École normale supérieure."

So his stepfather and the lawyer arrange for a meeting with Hyppolite, and Lanzmann tells us, "I never imagined that such complicity could exist between victim and thief."

The old man's first words were, "So you like my book so much you're prepared to steal it?"

Lanzmann, never at a loss for words, says, yes, he had no choice, and later ... finally ... admits that it was even maybe worth buying. "Which is what I had to do in order to read it."

See more reviews at RalphMag.org

Jane Griffiths says

A brilliant memoir, largely because Lanzmann, who is 91, has such a story to tell. A teenager in the Resistance, an assimilated French non-observant Jew, a passionate defender of Israel, lover of Simone de Beauvoir (whom he calls "le Castor"), friend of Jean-Paul Sartre (at the same time), undercover in North Korea, in Algeria with the Resistance, and auteur of the nine-hour film Shoah. Among other things. There is such a LOT in this. He conducts an affair with a beautiful nurse under the eyes of the security police in North Korea. He dines with former Wehrmacht officers in Bavaria. He teaches at the Free University in Berlin and is denounced as a communist (which he is not). I liked his energy, commitment and erudition. And he is still going! I read this in French, and his sometimes self-serving pomposity (this IS a memoir) is not so bad in that language as it is I think in others. French intellectualism does not translate well. An important book for understanding the 20th century. And I have not seen Shoah, but perhaps now I will.

Manfred says

It seems like the bookshelves are lousy with limp memoirs - have shitty parents and a creepy late-night uncle? Hike the Adirondack Trail after getting dumped by a guy who married your mom? Kick heroin or do a stretch in the penitentiary after coming home from Iraq without a kneecap? Good for you! However, do you really have enough to say that it deserves an entire book? Are you ready to explore the deep natures of courage and cowardice?

Because this guy most surely does have enough to say - he was lovers with Simone de Bouvoir for Chrissakes. Sartre coached him on the magical way in which amphetamines would help enhance his writing skills. He opened fire on Nazi convoys. He tried valiantly to make love to a beautiful nurse with flawless breasts while being constantly monitored by an oppressive regime. He elbowed with Presidents, he rolled a Renault at high-speed and was catapulted through the roof, he was present for the birth and adolescence of Israel, he covered murder trials, and oh yeah. . . he spent 12 years making a harrowing 9 HOUR DOCUMENTARY about the Final Solution.

We should probably leave the memoirs to men like this - those who clearly need to write them and are gifted

enough to deliver one that demands our attention. It's an autobiography, so somewhat self-selective - Lanzmann illuminates other people's shortcomings but doesn't spend much time on his own. Then again, what do you expect from a French intellectual?

Man wants to live at all costs, which is a truth Lanzmann realizes early in the book. The Patagonian Hare is a great book.

Pascale says

Lanzmann had a busy and enviable life as a journalist and epoch-marking documentary film-maker. Obviously his memoirs are interesting because he crossed paths with so many movers and shakers and yet managed to carve such a singular path for himself. I was surprised by the high register of his prose, full of imperfect subjunctives. Like most memoirists I've read, he falls into the trap of giving pride of place to his youth, which I always find annoying. Hey, guys, if you've been bored out of your socks for the last 30 years, why don't you commit suicide? Lanzmann spends most of his time describing his time in the Résistance, then his affair with Simone de Beauvoir, then big jump to "Shoah". While I can appreciate that these were the high points of his life, I wish he hadn't elided a great deal about his later marriage to Angelika and the shooting of his film "Tsahal". All the way through, I was seduced by his life-affirming attitude and his love of both the sea and mountains, but kept wondering what he had up his sleeve that he wasn't telling.

Michele Weiner says

Claude Lanzmann has a story to tell. He grew up during the worst of WWII, a French Jew whose very wise father removed him from Paris in order to protect him in the provinces. While living in the country, he managed to attend school, then as the war came back to Europe, he joined the resistance. His communist party affiliation was firm until they began to issue orders that he betray his non-communist fellows, at which point he bolted the party, becoming an assassination target, at least formally. (It didn't seem that anybody in the French communist party had the heart for murdering countrymen.) After the war, Lanzmann returned to Paris to make a career and lived briefly with his odd mother, who continued to drive him crazy. She had barely survived the Nazis, being unable to refrain from living as she liked even under threat. Returning to Paris after the war, Lanzmann became a writer, or rewriter, of articles for magazines. While in Paris, he became involved with Jean-Paul Sartre as part of his entourage. When Sartre and his long-time partner, Simone deBeauvoir, ended their physical relationship, Lanzmann stepped in. His sister was a famous actress for whom Sartre wrote some plays, and who committed suicide in her thirties. Lanzmann's brother was famous as well, and Lanzmann suggests that his family was the target of unpleasant comments regarding their overwhelming ambition and self-promotion. Lanzmann then married an actress. He edited Sartre's magazine, and continued to do journalism all over the world. At some point, having visited Israel, he conceived the idea for his two films, Porquois Israel and then his masterpiece, Shoah. He spent almost a decade filming, finally deciding to start in Poland at the camps and in the local communities surrounding Treblinka, Sobibor and Auschwitz, talking informally with witnesses to the activities of the camps and actual employees. Interspersed with footage of horrible tales told in idyllic rural settings, Lanzmann interviewed survivors in Israel and around the world. Many had been young men in the camps, forced to so the work the Germans would not do. One, for example, was a barber who cut off the hair of the women before they were sent to the gas chamber. Others buried the dead, and in one case, dug them up again two years later to burn them. Lanzmann reveals himself to have been thoughtless and impulsive, heedless of his own safety, and

completely convinced of his own value. Occasionally, he rehashes an old argument or settles an old score with a critic. Sometimes, I found his thoughts as written to be incomprehensible. But incomprehensibility, too, is representative of his way of thinking, and illustrative of his very unusual personality. After finishing the book, I purchased Shoah, and found Lanzmann's descriptions in the book of his methods and the film's content to have been thorough and accurate. Its impact is undeniable, and it is satisfying to see Lanzmann at work. A very worthwhile book, a very interesting man, a busy life.

Helen Epstein says

Claude Lanzmann -- the French writer, editor-in-chief of Les Temps Modernes and film-maker best known for his nine-and-a-half hour film Shoah -- was in Cambridge last week to promote his book of memoirs The Patagonian Hare (FSG, 544 pp). proved to be a cranky conversationalist. Billed as "A Conversation with Claude Lanzmann," the event turned out to be more of a cranky monologue. But when you're 86, still working, and are regarded by some as a cinematic genius, tout est permis, at least the audience of about 200 Harvard professors and students seemed to think so.

Lanzmann's book, The Patagonian Hare is a looping, uneven marathon of story-telling by a secular French Jew and alpha-male: A loosely chronological
set of reminiscences that Lanzmann dictated to a colleague over two years, it was published in France in 2009 and became a best-seller there. It's easy to see why. It's packed with people (like Jean Paul Sartre and lesser known philosophes) dear to the French; and dramatic episodes of courage, cowardice, and coming of age in the Resistance. Although Lanzmann does not absolve himself of cowardice -- particularly when, as a boy, he did not step forward to defend a classmate from anti-semitism -- mostly he presents himself as hero, fighter and bon vivant ("Even if I lived a hundred lives, I wouldn't be exhausted"). He's a great raconteur who's honed his narrative skills as a veteran journalist. Hare is exuberant and provocative at its best; bombastic and superficial at its worst, set against a changing twentieth century backdrop that includes the second world war; the Cold War; the Korean war; the Algerian war; several Israeli wars; and Lanzmann's personal 12-year war to make the film Shoah.

He was born November 27, 1925, the grandson of Russian Jews who fled pogroms and conscription in the great westward Yiddish-speaking migration at the turn of the century. "In a sense, I am of old French stock," he writes, in one of many instance where he seems ignorant of Jewish history, including French Jewish history. "My father was born in Paris on 14 July 1900, my family has been in France since the late nineteenth century; I would go so far as to say that I feel so securely French that Israel has never been problematic for me as it has been for the more recently assimilated Jews who arrived in France between the wars or after World War II....Going to Israel revealed to me that I was both innately French and yet also coincidentally French, not at all of old stock."

His parents were unhappily married; his mother Paulette left his father and her three children when Claude was nine. They were raised by his father, a politically prescient man who drilled his kids in escape techniques and arranged for their safety during the Nazi Occupation.

In 1943, although he already had earned his baccalauréat, Claude was sent to a boarding school in Clermont-Ferrand. Unbeknownst to his father, Claude had joined the jeunesses communistes already, although he had not yet read the literature. His father, unbeknownst to him, was already a member of the Mouvements unis de

la Resistance. This is well-covered ground by now and Lanzmann does not dwell on it. Wisely, he spends as much time describing his unusual family, especially his difficult and wildly unconventional Jewish mother Paulette. "I was nine years old when, coming home from school with my [younger] brother and sister, I found our house deserted," he writes, in the understated way he chooses for personal matters. "My first reaction was one of relief rather than sadness: my parents' arguments had grown so frequent and so violent over the years that I lived in fear that the worst would happen, murder perhaps, or suicide. That was in 1934. At the time, those women who, appalled by the conditions imposed on them by marriage, dared to throw cautions and security to the wind, to leave their husbands and their children were extremely rare; one had to be made of steel to brave the stigmatism and the daily heroism to which they were condemning themselves."

All true, but surely the later judgment of the man who became Simone de Beauvoir's lover at the age of 27, rather than the experience of an abandoned child. Passages like these made me realize the many difference between memoirs and memoir -- the first an extended self-styled epitaph; the second, a quest for self-understanding.

All of them -- both Lanzmann's parents; his father's partner, Helene; his mother's companion, the poet Monny de Boully; and the three children -- survived the war. Father and stepfather together escort the young Claude to his first fancy brothel. Monny prevails upon a friend to get Claude admitted mid-term to the prestigious Lycee Louis-le-Grand, on track to the Ecole Normale Superieure and stage manages his first affair by picking up a beautiful woman in the street and inviting her to consider his step-son. "Seduction is not generally a family activity," Lanzmann writes, but Monny "sang my praises, making me an object of desire." They brought her home to meet Paulette and, a week later, Lanzmann had a mistress.
Claude's younger sister Evelyne's love affairs were also inextricably tied up with family. Raised by Lanzmann père and her Catholic stepmother Helene, Evelyne arrived in Paris at 16 and promptly fell in love with a series of her brother's friends and colleagues including, eventually, Jean Paul Sartre. Evelyne, an actress, toured with road companies and performed in Sartre's plays. Sartre fell in love with her and offstage, the two had a secret liaison, monitored and clucked over by Claude and Simone de Beauvoir. Evelyne appears to have been deeply wounded by the repeated rupture of attachments that began with her mother. She killed herself in 1967 at the age of 40 and Lanzmann's chapter about her is the most tender and affecting in the book.
Hare is deliberately non-linear so it's very hard to keep track of dates, but at about the time Evelyne arrived in Paris, Lanzmann fell passionately in love with actress Judith Magre, who in his account up left him after six months and disappeared without a trace. The result, he writes, was that he failed his exams for Ecole Normale and instead studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. Student friends invited him to Tubingen and he had his first encounter with Germans after the war. It was 1946, so he must have been 20 or 21 when he was invited to spend a week-end at the estate of the von Neurath family, dined with former Wehrmacht officers and stumbled upon a small concentration camp located on the property. Although he describes what it looked like, Lanzmann doesn't get into its impact on him. Nor does he explain his decision to take a teaching job in the French zone of West Berlin, becoming a lecturer at the recently-founded Free University.
He spent at least two post-war years there teaching philosophy, French, and a course on anti-semitism that students asked for, using Jean Paul Sartre's Reflexions sur la Question Juive as a text. This book had been important to him when he was a teenager and he assigned it now to German students, some of whom had returned from military service. "I was identical to the Jews described in it, raised outside any religion, any culture that might be called Jewish." But Lanzmann writes little about their discussions. Instead, he relates that he wrote an expose of the failure of de-nazification at the university (reprinting or at least describing it would have been a good idea). That led to more freelance work back in Paris and to the offices of Sartre's Les Temps Modernes. By the summer of 1952, he had established himself as a journalist and become the lover of Simone de Beauvoir ("We lived together as a married couple for seven years, from 1952 to 1957, I am the only man with whom Simone de Beauvoir lived a quasi-marital existence.") In 1952, Lanzmann also

made his first trip to Israel. Though he has never learned Hebrew, he made his first film about the country in 1973: Israel, Why. That documentary led to his working for 12 years on Shoah, first screened in 1985, still internationally regarded as a milestone in film-making, and just broadcast on television to 5 million Turks and untold numbers f viewers in Iran.

Kim Raymond says

Claude Lanzmann s'est éteint aujourd'hui à l'âge de 92 ans. Un petit mot pour souligner cette œuvre, le récit d'une vie hors norme, portée par une engagement d'une rare intégrité, menée avec fougue et passion, racontée avec une voix unique, délaissant une forme chronologique au profit de thématiques et de projets qui se succèdent avec cohérence. L'un des meilleurs mémoires des temps modernes (oh, oh, pun not intended) qu'il m'ait été donné de lire - et ce n'est pas peut dire, considérant qu'il s'agit là d'un de mes domaines de spécialité dans le vaste monde des lettres.
