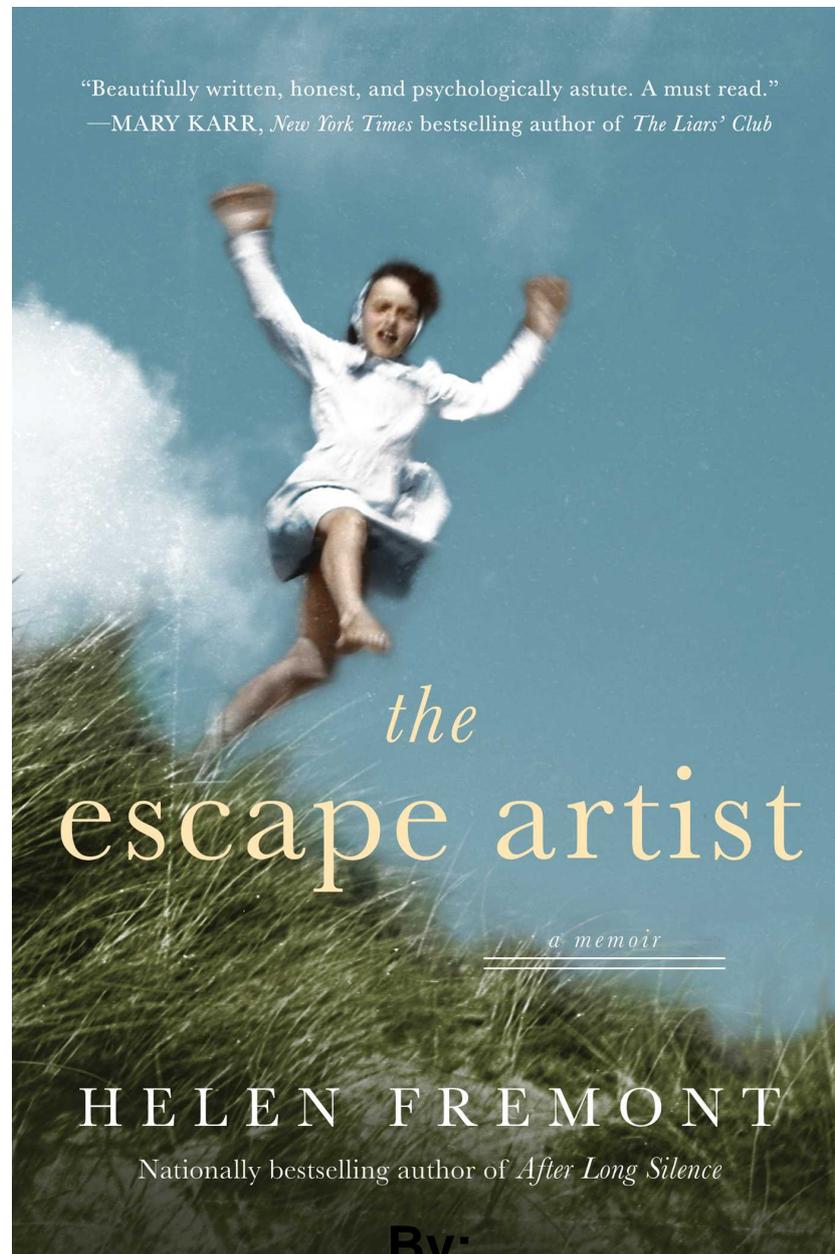


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This is easily one of the best memoirs I've read in a while. Books like these are part of the reason I don't five-star everything left and right. In my quest to separate the wheat from the chaff, I look for quality books that not only stand out from the rest but do so with eloquence and pizazz. THE ESCAPE ARTIST is a truly haunting memoir written by a woman whose parents were holocaust survivors. She writes about the strain of growing up

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### Sherwood Smith

Back in the seventies, I got to talking with a dour young woman my age, who usually kept herself to herself, interacting little with our fellow schlubs at the studio. But we ended up being the volunteers

to hold down the fort in that dead week between Christmas and New Years, when the film industry is pretty much a ghost town. She asked why I stayed, and I admitted that I needed the golden time pay as my car had thrown a rod and the engine needed complete rebuilding, then I asked her why she

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So we chatted. I don't remember how we got around to the subject of weddings, but I admitted that the last one I'd been to, I'd been the only goy at a very conservative Jewish wedding, brought as a plus one by one of the wedding party. I ended up sitting by myself pretty much the entire evening; though people were perfectly polite, they didn't know me, and it was clear that this was a very close-knit community. I ended up people-watching, and admitted that I was pretty sure I could tell the Holocaust survivors among them (I knew there were some) from those who'd grown up in America. There was a tightness in their faces, the grooves carved much harder by silent suffering.

Whereupon she unlocked the gates, and talked about what it was like to be the child of survivors. She, and her siblings, had ended up dispersing as far from home as they could get just to preserve their sanity—though they loved their parents deeply, all the more because there were no other relatives. Everyone else had been gassed, shot, or starved to death.

She ended our conversation by saying that somebody ought to do a study on the second generation of survivors, though nobody would (she said bitterly), partly residual anti-Semitism, but also because that elder generation kept silent. What they went through didn't come out through stories, but in ways they saw the world, and interacted with it. Including at home.

This incident sprang to mind when I read Helen Fremont's second memoir here. I hadn't remembered that I'd read the first one years ago, which I had found problematical. Not the writing, which is superb, but in other ways: for example, it seemed clear that Fremont's family was not a party to this wish to air the family secrets, and in assumptions like "we were raised Catholic" when it seemed clear that no, Helen and her sister were given the label "Catholic" while growing up, as part of the family disguise. I had been given to understand by Catholic friends that being "raised Catholic" means that the religion is a part of family custom and daily life.

Those issues came back to mind as I read this book, which I thought would be more about her father's experiences (I really wanted to know how he managed to survive six years in a gulag, a second hammer after the horrors of WW II, and the title, "The Escape Artist", seemed to hint that that would be the subject) but actually what we get is a caroming back and forth between the far past, present, recent past, childhood, present again, and so on, as Fremont delves more deeply into

what is clearly a deeply dysfunctional family.

The book begins with Fremont discovering, shortly after her father's death, that she has been not just disinherited, but in effect legally declared dead. Though at the funeral, everyone was full of loving words.

And so we launch into the past, and what it was like to grow up in that household full of secrets. Fremont writes such vivid prose, it's easy to fall right into the book as those secrets come out, some of which may or may not be true.

I had two problems with the book, first the jumping around in time, which kept throwing me out of the narrative, and secondly, Fremont keeps repeating how much they all loved each other, then goes on to detail behaviors that were anything but loving.

## **Kasa Cotugno**

In rereading other reviews glowing with praise I wonder, did we read the same book?

In 1999, Helen Fremont wrote *After a Long Silence*, a successful memoir which reveals that she and Lara, her sister, who had been raised Catholic, didn't discover until 1992 that their parents actually were Polish Jews who managed to escape the Holocaust. Upon the success of this memoir, Fremont's family cut all ties to her which took years to reestablish. I remember enjoying this book when I read it 20 years ago.

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But this followup appears to be sort of a *Mommie Dearest* work due to her fury at being disinherited by both parents. Upon her father's death in 2002 she receives a copy of the will with a codicil claiming she "predeceased" him, and a similar one shows up upon her mother's death 12 years later. Evidently there wasn't a reconnection as strong as Fremont thought. In *The Escape Artist* she lays out the toxic atmosphere in the home, the demons faced by her and Lara, who suffered from virulent mental illness that remained untreated much of the time. It's a wonder that both women, now in their 60's, attained multiple degrees and have had professional lives.

The problem I had with this book is the great divide between what went on behind closed doors and

the claims that they all loved each other very much. Also that there was so much repetition, great reveals that weren't all that surprising, and the fact that Fremont broke the cardinal rule of revealing family secrets for no other reason than just to do so.

## Jill Meyer

In the mid 1990s, Boston attorney Helen Fremont discovered that her family was Jewish, rather than Catholic, as she had been told growing up. Her parents were Holocaust survivors and had lost most of the members of their families. Only her mother's sister had managed to survive by marrying an Italian aristocrat and they were able to save Helen's mother. Helen's boyfriend also survived, tracked her down in Rome. They married and moved to the United States, settling in upstate New York and raising their

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In this new book, Fremont unpacks family history much deeper than she does in the first book. Her older sister, now a psychiatrist, had out-of-control mental issues as a teenager and into her adult years. Helen's parents were largely ineffective in helping "Lara" cope because they didn't want to let anyone outside their own familial circle know what they were dealing with. In fact, Helen's mother was incredibly close to her own sister and her family in Rome and she never let them in on family problems.

Looking back, Fremont thinks the lying and secrecy her family indulged in made the family unable to cope with any problems. The two girls- Helen and her sister- certainly had a yin-yang relationship.

They often went months and even years without speaking, BUT also had long periods where they were best friends. Helen had similar relationships with her parents. In fact, we learn early on that her parents and sister had cut Helen out of her parents's will, declaring her legally "predeceased".

Fremont's book is an interesting read. She holds nothing back, though disguises people and events. I'm going to review a bit later another new book I read called "My City of Dreams", by Lisa Gruenberg, which is also first generation memoir. Look for it if interested.

## Donna

A memoir of Helen's childhood through adulthood where family secrets about past events, as well as mental illness, shaped the entire family.

I always feel a bit odd when I say I enjoyed reading a book like this. The author went through so many hardships, and her relations with her family had so many ups and screeching downs, that 'enjoy' has to be understood in context of being hooked into the story.

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I don't have siblings, so this was kind of like a peek into the unhealthy relationships that can occur. Helen's not sure if her sister Lara is mentally ill, or if maybe she herself is. The book is a page-turner: you keep wanting to see what happens next, and hoping that Helen comes out happy and whole at the end.