

## BOOKS

### KAFKA: A Biography

By RONALD HAYMAN  
Oxford University Press. \$19.95

A review by Guy Davenport

When Franz Kafka died in 1924, a month short of his 41st birthday, he had published in obscure places only a few of the stories for which he is now world-famous. To his friends in his native Prague, his death was that of a witty intellectual—neurotically inclined to dark moodiness. He was a lawyer for a workers' insurance compensation firm, he lived at home with his parents, he was habitually in love with one girl after another—so that the bulk of his writing, as it has survived, is a collection of love letters to Felice Bauer (twice engaged, the engagement twice broken off), Grete Bloch, Milena Jesenska-Polak and Dora Dymant—and he was known to suffer from chronic insomnia.

His nights were spent writing by an open window, no matter what the weather, by candlelight (so that his parents would not shout at him to go to bed), and in the deepest anguish to be expressed in modern literature. Here he wrote his three unfinished novels, "The Missing Man" (renamed "Amerika"), "The Trial" and "The Castle."

We owe these masterful works to the astute judgment of Kafka's closest friend, the novelist Max Brod. Kafka asked on his deathbed that the novels, as well as all his other writing, be destroyed.

Brod knew the value of these strange novels. He was eased into his decision to betray his deathbed promise by a friend's flippant solution: "So burn your own works," said the friend, "and save Kafka's."

Kafka's German prose is simple, lucid and stark. In a good translation, it loses practically nothing. It is plausible that Kafka might have written in Yiddish or Czech. In choosing a German designed as the bureaucratic common language of the Austro-Hungarian empire, he had the advantage in vocabulary and syntax of a prose as abstract and undistorted by vulgar usage as the philosophical and scientific Latin of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Ronald Hayman's meticulously researched biography shows how the stories and novels grew from incidents and anguishes in Kafka's outwardly uneventful life, and how the adjective "Kafkaesque" applies to the inaddeningly awry way things happened to him, as well as to the plots of his fiction. Kafka's genius was to see universal anxieties and fears in his private ones.

It is interesting to know that in Prague the Austro-Hungarian emperor maintained an impressive castle which he never visited. "The Castle," however, is about all the centers of power (the Kremlin, the Pentagon, Peking, the Reichschancellery) before which we feel perfectly helpless.

Kafka's central anxiety is about what he calls the Law. The Law was given to us centuries ago (by Moses, by the Roman Senate, by Mohammed, by Jesus, by Buddha, by Napoleon) in conflicting versions. Do we fit our lives to ancient law that

could scarcely foresee our modern problems; do we re-interpret the law; or do we disregard it?

Kafka wrote at a time when Freud was demonstrating that we are all crippled by guilt from forgotten acts in our childhoods, and that our dreams are terrible struggles with this nameless guilt. All of Kafka's stories resemble dreams. And he wrote at a time when serious thinkers like Kierkegaard and Martin Buber were finding a deep wisdom in folk tales and myths. Kafka himself was fascinated by wandering Yiddish actors who gave naive comic dramas in cafés, and loved (to his father's disgust) to talk to them and bring them home.

Kafka's great donation to literature was to return writing to its ancient duty of prophecy. "Amerika" describes an alienation of people from a coherent culture which we began to experience in two world wars and which will probably be the common condition of all mankind by the end of the century. "The Trial" predicts the Nazis, the Communists and the world we now inhabit. What seems to be a nightmare in Kafka's novel is enacted daily in Argentina, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China or practically anywhere.

Had Kafka lived until the Second World War, he would most certainly have died in a concentration camp, as did his sister Ottilia.

Ronald Hayman's biography lists 86 studies of Kafka and the list is not complete. His biography, finely and sensitively written, will be the standard one for quite a while. In a curious sense, however, it does not render obsolete Max Brod's intimate and affectionate biography of 1954, nor does it displace the charming accounts of Kafka's friends, such as those of Janouch and Urdidil. One effect of this new, seemingly exhaustive, biography is that Kafka appears too complex a human being to be enclosed in the pages of one book.

The Kafka who began to be known in the English-speaking world just after the Second World War was a tormented Jewish intellectual who wrote bleak and despairing symbolic stories. This view is corrected as we learn that Kafka's sense of humor was delicious and puckish, that he was giddy in love, usually with two women at once, from adolescence onward, that he was a warm and loyal friend and a wonderful traveling companion.

His imagination, one of the greatest in all literature, was not always in the service of literature, as witness the increasing volumes of letters to friends and lovers. Toward the end of his life, Hayman tells us, Kafka chanced upon a little girl in tears, who had lost her doll in a park. He thought quickly. He had just seen that very doll several blocks away, setting out for a trip around the world. For months afterwards, Kafka wrote daily letters, as though from the doll, to this little girl, recounting hilarious adventures in city after city.

All readers of Kafka will cherish this anecdote as much as they will welcome this new biography.

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