

Few writers have depicted 20th-century alienation, isolation, and anxiety more surreally than Czech writer Franz Kafka, who felt like an outsider his entire life. If today *Kafkaesque* evokes universal alienation nightmarishly and illogically, it also suggests Kafka's attempt to find personal meaning in a world he took to be empty. A Jewish native of Prague for most of his life—and yet a speaker and writer of German with little knowledge of Yiddish—he felt out of place among Prague's minority Jewish population. In addition, he distanced himself from his profession, his lovers, and his father. His deep sense of

# Franz Kafka

By Jessica Teisch

**"All too often men are betrayed by the word freedom. And as freedom is counted among the most sublime feelings, so the corresponding disillusionment can be also sublime."**

—"A Report to an Academy," 1917

estrangement was insurmountable, and as a result, Kafka never felt at ease with himself, his family, or his culture. He portrayed this disquiet in his diaries, short stories, and novels. His work also illuminated with blinding clarity the growth of Europe's nightmarish totalitarian states, dehumanization, and bureaucracy—universal fears distilled from Prague's tumultuous history. "Of course," writes critic Michael Dirda, "Kafka is, for good or ill, much more than just a writer. He's an emblem, the poster boy of 20th-century alienation" (*Washington Post*, 1/5/03).

Not trained as a philosopher, Kafka never identified himself as an existentialist, though he appreciated the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. After Kafka's death, however, Jean-Paul Sartre considered him an existentialist, while Albert Camus considered him an absurdist. Kafka's stories—a young man awakes to find himself transformed into a giant bug, a man starves to death because he can't find food

PHOTO: CORBIS

„Prag läßt nicht los. Uns beide nicht. Dieses Mütterchen hat Krallen. Da muß man sich fügen oder -. An zwei Stellen müßten wir es ändern, am Vyšhrad und am Hradschin, dann wäre es möglich, daß wir loskommen.“  
Kafka an Oscar Pollack

„Von Prag weggehen. Gegenüber diesem stärksten menschlichen Schaden, der mich je getroffen hat, mit dem stärksten Reaktionsmittel, über das ich verfüge, vorgehen.“  
Franz Kafka



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„Kafka war Prag und Prag war Kafka. Und wir, seine Freunde, wir wußten, daß dieses Prag überall im Werk Kafkas enthalten war, in winzigen Splittern...“  
Johannes Urzidil

„Prag ist nicht nur die Stadt, aus der Franz Kafka seine Bilderwelt ablas, er selbst war dieses Prag. Er lebte in und mit Prag, wie Prag in und mit ihm lebte.“  
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Window Display in a Kafka Bookshop in Prague's Lesser Quarter

he likes, an ape talks at a scientific meeting—reflect these modernist philosophies. In *The Trial* (1925), a man is arrested without knowing his crime—a story resonant with Kafka's central (and frighteningly realistic) theme: the absurdity within a nightmarish and dehumanized world. "You may object that it is not a trial at all; you are quite right, for it is only a trial if I recognize it as such," explains one character. In his meditations on his other protagonists—each typifying the trapped, alienated human severed from personal and communal connection—Kafka imbues these "antiheroes" with more pessimism and hopelessness than we ever find in the characters of Sartre or Camus.

If Kafka's characters, in their unrelenting hopelessness, are left wanting as they grope for meaning, often so are we readers. Kafka avoided interpretation in his works: even metaphors, he felt, could never express his thoughts. Seeking new fictional techniques better suited to his themes, Kafka rejected many traditional elements of the novel. Instead, his unsentimental, morally nonjudgmental works form "a meditation, a fantastical historiography, an essay, a parable," writes author Zadie Smith ("The Limited Circle Is Pure," *The New Republic*, 11/03/03). In depicting vivid nightmares in unorthodox ways, Kafka attempted to reflect what existed outside the mundane world. In the process, he created a new form of literary surrealism.

Kafka was born into a middle-class family in Prague (now in the Czech Republic, then in Bohemia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) on July 3, 1883. His mother, Julie, was the daughter of a brewery owner; his father, Hermann, was a successful wholesaler. As a family man, Hermann was cruelly overbearing—especially toward the young Franz. (Yet, oddly, Kafka chose to live with his parents for most of his life.) Much of Kafka's fiction portrays the unjust sentences his father dealt him. In his self-lacerating "Letter to His Father" (1919), Kafka wrote, "My writing was all about you."

As a youth, Kafka read extensively and recorded his dreams, ideas, and experiences in diaries. Although he destroyed much of his early writing, he published short prose pieces. "The Metamorphosis" (1915) is one of his few influential works published during his lifetime. In 1908, a few years after receiving a law degree, Kafka started work at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute in Prague, where he stayed until 1922, two years before his death. Although he had many girlfriends, affairs, and unfulfilled engagements, Kafka always managed to talk himself out of marriage, including one to his true love, journalist Milena Jesná. A few friendships—in particular that of writer, critic, and editor Max Brod—seem to have sustained his need for intimacy. In 1917, Kafka contracted tuberculosis; two years later, influenza led to hospitalization and depression. By

## Where to Start

"**THE METAMORPHOSIS**," in which a young man turns into a frighteningly large insect without questioning why it's happening, captures the sense of alienation pervading modern society. **THE TRIAL** and **THE CASTLE** are also terrifying parables about contemporary consciousness, totalitarian bureaucracy, misdirection, and cruelty. For nonfiction, sample Kafka's diaries or letters.

1924, his health quickly deteriorating, he moved with a new love to Berlin and then to a sanatorium outside Vienna. He died of tuberculosis on June 3, 1924, a month before his 41st birthday. He was buried in the New Jewish cemetery in Prague. At his death, Kafka requested that all of his unpublished writings be destroyed. Fortunately, Max Brod disregarded Kafka's request. Taking great editorial liberties, he had Kafka's un-

finished novels, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Amerika*, published posthumously in German. Since then, new translations of his work have appeared in many languages.

## Kafka, Religion, and the Critics

"What do I have in common with the Jews? I don't have anything in common with myself!" Kafka wrote in his diary, reflecting his uneasy relationship to Judaism. Even though he held often contradictory religious views, Judaism—and its implications for his position in Prague society—influenced him greatly. In nineteenth-century Prague, the Czech-speaking majority resented the relatively wealthy and powerful German-speaking Jews. Kafka, though not part of this elite group, was raised speaking German. While anti-Semitism prevailed in the late 1800s, many Jews had already assimilated into Czech culture. Having experienced two pogroms, Kafka's father had even had his family declared Czech nationals. In his "Letter to His Father," Kafka condemned assimilation, arguing that it was better to purge Judaism altogether than leave an "insufficient scrap." Yet, while he attended synagogue with his father on occasion and studied Hebrew, Yiddish, and Jewish folklore and history, he did not practice Judaism as an adult.

Still, many critics—and some contemporaries like Max Brod—view Kafka as a religious writer. "Despite all his denials and beautiful evasions, [Kafka] quite simply *is* Jewish writing," writes Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon*. In "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk," the "folk" may represent the hardworking, obstacle-surmounting Jew. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. and a priest engage in discussion resembling Talmudic debate. The ape-turned-man in "A Report to the Academy" perhaps satirizes Jews' assimilation into Western culture. Some critics even interpret the protagonist of *The Castle* as a metaphor for the "wandering Jew." But Kafka secularized many of these references; the Castle itself, for example, could represent anybody's God. "The Metamorphosis" features a Christian family, perhaps in an attempt to universalize humanity's alienation.

After the Nazis' 1939 takeover of Czechoslovakia, its Jewish population, which had numbered 118,000, all but disappeared; Kafka's sisters and loves perished in Nazi concentration camps. Though Kafka did not live to witness the Holocaust, his writing reflects the atrocities afflicting Jews and all of humankind in the 20th century.

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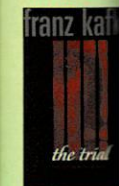
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## MAJOR WORKS

### "The Metamorphosis" (1915)



Few stories boast the range of interpretations of Kafka's best-known work, "The Metamorphosis." Prevailing analysis includes discussions of loneliness, isolation, and alienation, the degradation of modern life, reactions against the crushing demands of a bourgeois society, and even (taking a Freudian tack) Kafka's low self-esteem caused by his father. Stanley Corngold lists over 130 interpretations in *The Commentator's Despair* (1973) but concludes that no one overrides the others.

**THE STORY:** Gregor Samsa, a young salesman, lives with and supports his parents and younger sister but lacks real meaning in life. One morning he awakes to discover he's been transformed into a disgusting bug. At first, he's concerned with the mundane: How will he get out of bed and to the office on time? Soon his speech slurs, he crawls under furniture, and he eats scraps of food. His family, strangely unsurprised by his condition, which Gregor never questions either, refuses to have anything to do with him—and he slowly wastes away.

**"['The Metamorphosis' is] universally regarded as one of the central stories of our spiritual and literary age. . . . My working principle in reading Kafka is to observe that he did everything possible to evade interpretation. . . . When he is most himself, Kafka gives us a continuous inventiveness and originality that rivals Dante, and truly challenges Proust and Joyce as that of the dominant Western author of our century, setting Freud aside."** HAROLD BLOOM, *FRANZ KAFKA'S THE METAMORPHOSIS* (NEW YORK, 1988).

**" . . . all commentators agree that it is a story about estrangement and alienation. That thesis, however, does not account for the baffling ending of the story."** STANLEY HILL, *THE EXPLICATOR*, 3/03.

**"If Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' strikes anyone as something more than an entomological fantasy, then I congratulate him on having joined the ranks of good and great readers. . . . He is the greatest German writer of our time. . . . Contrast and unity, style and matter, manner and plot are most perfectly integrated."** VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S LECTURE ON "THE METAMORPHOSIS."

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A classic, terrifying inquiry into modern consciousness.

### The Trial (1925)



Kafka started writing *The Trial* in 1914 but never completed it. After his death, his friend Max Brod salvaged and then overhauled it. The book begins with the famous words: "Someone must have traduced Joseph K. for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning." As suggested, the novel addresses themes of

totalitarianism's destructiveness, the absurdity of human nature, modern paranoia, and personal persecution.

**THE STORY:** Bank clerk Joseph K. awakes one morning to find himself accused of a crime he did not commit. Worse yet, he has no knowledge of the nature of the crime. Although released after his arrest, Joseph K. must report back to court regularly. As his fate hangs in the balance, Joseph K.'s personal and professional life turns increasingly unstable—until he can handle the uncertainty no more.

**"A creeping suspicion that the world closely resembles Kafka's fable assails the lively imagination. Why does Joseph K.'s year-long tryst with the Law fail so abjectly? Kafka's justice remains impervious to inquiry."** MICHAEL PINKER, *REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION*, 1998.

**"[W]e should keep in mind the lovely autobiographical fact that Kafka could not contain his own laughter when reading *The Trial* out loud to his uncomprehending family. . . . This is black humor indeed, and the punch line is not that Kafka hated his father or that God does not exist. . . . The peculiar beauty of Kafka lies in the very impossibility of his project, which was, I think, to express concretely—in the most precise language available—those things in life that fall outside of the concretely explicable or expressible."** ZADIE SMITH, "THE LIMITED

CIRCLE IS PURE," *THE NEW REPUBLIC*, 11/03/03

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Another horrifying, existential investigation into modernity's many quandaries.

### The Castle (1926)



*The Castle*, one of the three incomplete novels Kafka left when he died, is one of his most influential works. Again, critics suggest that the novel contains multiple meanings about isolation and alienation, the misuse of political power, anti-Semitism, Kafka's quest for God, and human hopes, fears, and prejudices. The protagonist, K., also resembles Joseph K. of *The Trial* in his uncertainty about the reality around him and the amorphous laws that govern his behavior.

**THE STORY:** A land surveyor named K. enters a village where he has been summoned to work—but he's not sure why he was sent for, or even if there's work to be done. He attempts to contact officials of the mysterious Castle, who unfortunately provide no answers about his official status. K. then struggles in vain to find his way to the castle, with no help from his two assistants or the villagers. When he returns to the village, he strives for acceptance, after more misunderstandings and vague promises.

**"Every page is a puzzle, and the more tantalising because the ostensible narration, wherever it wanders, lifts detail after detail into brilliant light. Yet a puzzle should perhaps have more leverage to it, a more patent lure. It is useless 'K's' wanting to get to the castle unless the reader wants to get**

there too; the basis of sympathy between them is tenuous, and 'K's' manners do not increase it." B. S., GUARDIAN UNLIMITED, 4/4/30.

**"From the absurd circuitry of managed care to our Dilbertesque workplaces and the bizarre comic opera playing in Washington, the relevance of *The Castle*, Kafka's parable of bureaucracy gone mad, has never been lost on the modern reader. . . . The only comfort in this shared nightmare lies in describing it, finding its hilarity and irony."** ROZ SPAFFORD, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 4/5/98.

FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 4/5/98.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A nightmarish inquiry into the intangible and cruel nature of law and bureaucracy.

## Amerika (The Man Who Disappeared) (1927)



*Amerika*, the first of Kafka's unfinished novels to be written, was the last to be published after his death—and critics still debate how the author planned to end it. Like *The Castle*, it addresses themes of oppression, bizarre, cruel authorities, and vague bureaucracies. But unlike his other works, *Amerika* is more picaresque and realistic, though Kafka never visited the United States.

**THE STORY:** As punishment for impregnating a maid who seduced him, the teenage Karl Rossmann is shipped off to

Amerika by his parents. Once in New York, his uncle, for whom he's supposed to work, fires and then abandons him. Karl then finds a job as an elevator operator at the grandiose Hotel Occidental—and suffers more humiliations as he fends for himself among the opportunities and dangers of turn-of-the-last-century America.

**"[The] United States that Kafka depicts is more based upon myth than any real experience of the place. . . . That the Statue of Liberty holds aloft a sword instead of a torch and that a bridge connects New York City and Boston unsettle the reading by placing an essentially realist novel close to the realm of fantasy."** ANDREW ERVIN, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 12/8/02.

**"Certainly, it is less stultifying, less enclosed, less ponderous than [*The Trial* and *The Castle*]. . . . More interestingly, perhaps, the novel churns with strange sexual undercurrents, though it's unclear just quite what we're to make of them."**

MICHAEL DIRDA, WASHINGTON POST, 1/5/03.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Kafka's only novel fully set in America, and another striking comment on needless, never-ending bureaucracy. ■

## Selected Other Works

### "THE JUDGMENT" (1913)

In this short story, the young merchant Georg Bendemann consults his invalid father about whether or not he should reveal his love and professional successes to a less fortunate friend. Unbeknownst to Georg, his father has undermined his son's relationship with this friend. Judged unworthy, Georg allows external forces to determine his fate.

### "IN THE PENAL COLONY" (1919)

In a penal colony on an island, an officer demonstrates to an explorer the Harrow—an instrument of torture and capital punishment. When the explorer expresses his moral disapproval of this machine, the officer takes the place of a condemned man and sacrifices his life. Like *The Trial*, this short story features an evil social system with mindless underlings—but offers a glimmer of hope at the end.

### "WEDDING PREPARATIONS IN THE COUNTRY" (1919)

A young Prague businessman

decides to visit his fiancé and her mother in the country—but can't seem to make the awkward journey alone.

### "A COUNTRY DOCTOR" (1919)

A doctor recalls his nighttime call to a critically ill patient's bedside, which starts with the rape of his servant girl and a nightmarish ride on demonic horses. Preoccupied with his personal life, the doctor fails at first to find a fatal wound crawling with worms. Unable to do anything, he eventually loses everything.

### "LETTER TO HIS FATHER" (1919)

"Dearest Father," this never-delivered letter begins, "You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you." In this letter, Kafka hoped to place common blame on himself and his father for their tumultuous relationship.

### "A HUNGER ARTIST" (1924)

This ironic short story features a world-famous "hunger artist" who stages a fast in a circus—and, at his death, admits he found no honor in his fasting; he just never found food he liked. The world barely notices his death, and a panther replaces him in

his cage.

### "JOSEPHINE THE SINGER, OR THE MOUSE FOLK" (1925)

The last story Kafka wrote features Josephine the mouse, a beautiful singer revered all over. When her status changes and she disappears, life goes on as normal.

### THE DIARIES OF FRANZ KAFKA 1910-1913, 1914-1923

Kafka started writing in a diary at age 27. These entries portray his thoughts on his descriptive powers, his friends and family, and his own neuroses.

### LETTERS TO MILENÁ (1952)

Milená, who translated Kafka's early prose works into Czech, received love letters from Kafka that recount his Jewish and Czech heritage and his love for her.

### LETTERS TO FELICE (1967)

Kafka, who met Felice in 1912, was engaged to her twice. These letters illustrate how greatly she influenced his writing and reveal his complex ideas about love and his thoughts on bachelorhood, writing, and art. ■