
Nicholas Murray. *Kafka: A Biography*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 432p.

SUSAN NYIKOS
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Is it possible to say anything about Franz Kafka that has not been said before? One must wonder. After a twenty-year hiatus in English publication, Nicholas Murray's *Kafka: A Biography* proves that, indeed, it can be done. Murray succeeds famously in bringing to light a lesser-discussed, happier side to the life of this haunting and haunted writer of gloom, angst, and self-chastising. Although Kafka never ceases to complain about an indifferent father, he enjoys the appreciation of his employers; in spite of several engagements, he never marries but truly enjoys sex; though he endlessly frets audience disapproval of his writing, he enjoys early success under the imprint of Kurt Wolff; his family is skeptical about religion, yet he embraces Judaism on his own terms.

To trace Kafka's personal and literary path, Murray opens his book by painting a lively picture of all the locales in Prague Kafka frequented during his short and tormented life. Similarly, throughout the text, Murray makes the reader aware of the physical microcosms surrounding Kafka, as if to suggest how strongly he was affected by the tangible world around him. Kafka feels trapped in the family home: he stays with his family, although he could live independently, and by the time he decides to leave, it is too late. He agonizes over the hustle and bustle, the noises, the constant disturbing presence of a life separate and different from his, which he perceives as one of the causes for his frequent inability to write. These feelings of physical and mental entrapment, as well as his inferiority complex towards his father, provide the central theme for what is perhaps his best-known novella, *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*). While there is nothing new about this connection, Murray contends that this same anguish is clearly discernible from Kafka's expansive correspondence.

Murray inserts into his text a host of quotations from Kafka's personal writings—his diary and his letters—as well as from his fiction, which makes Murray's prose even more compelling. At times, the book reads like a confessional: readers find themselves drawn into the tormented mind of the thinker, the writer, and the lover, and they participate in the agony and angst. The charm of Murray's book lies in showing how the private man and the professional writer is one and the same; yet, it would be, Murray contends, an unfair oversimplification to advocate that Kafka's literary work *is* a quasi-autobiography.

The main premise of Murray's view on Kafka and his literary pursuits is that "*how things are perceived* may be the fact that matters" for him (38; Murray's italics), which

we can clearly see in his correspondence with Felice Bauer and Milena Jesenska, not just in his published prose. And he perceives the world, including himself, in the worst possible way: “I have vigorously absorbed the negative element of the age in which I live” (272), he writes in his notebook in 1918. That may be so, suggests Murray, but it is all done through the eyes of an overly keen observer—and that is where Kafka’s genius lies: capturing the universal through the personal and minute. What is more, no matter what he writes, his prose will be sharp, elegant, and precise.

Another merit of Murray’s book is that he provides a fine and fair description of practically all of Kafka’s surviving literary-minded works while he consciously avoids conceding to any mainstream critical slant. Moreover, in his Afterword, he laments how different eras and different critical trends considered Kafka’s *œuvre* according to their own perspective but, sadly, paid little attention to his artistic and aesthetic achievement.

In all, Murray’s readers are given a highly readable, honest, and largely unbiased—unless open enthusiasm qualifies as such—biography of Franz Kafka, the man, the writer, and the tormented soul. This book is especially likely to please students and fellow researchers intrigued by Kafka because of its rich primary material, although readers might miss a customary bibliography. Also, those reading the book simply for pleasure will encounter slight overlaps and repetitions in the text; however, researchers who focus on individual chapters separately will be delighted to find those earmarks useful and conducive to their work. ✱