



Kafka: A Very Short Introduction

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Franz Kafka is among the most intriguing and influential writers of the last century. During his lifetime he worked as a civil servant and published only a handful of short stories, the best known being *The Transformation*. His other three novels, published after his death, helped to found his reputation as a uniquely perceptive interpreter of the twentieth century.

Discussing both Kafka's crisis-ridden life and the subtleties of his art, Ritchie Robertson provides an intriguing and accessible look at the life of this fascinating author. Using *Metamorphosis* as a recurring example, Robertson shows how Kafka's work explores such characteristically modern themes as the place of the body in culture, the power of institutions over people, and the possibility of religion after Nietzsche had proclaimed "the death of God."

Kafka: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Riku Sayuj says

By writing, he could escape futile self-analysis through assuming a higher perspective.

I was tempted to pick this up as I struggled through *The Castle*. This VSI presents a minutely personal and deliberately non-literary exploration of Kafka. The literary works are treated as works of self-analysis. I am not qualified to comment on the correctness of this approach, but I can say that it was quite unsatisfactory.

In any case, it would have been impossible to decode Kafka or say baldly what Kafka's work is 'about'. There is no way into Kafka except by reading Kafka and puzzling over Kafka.

umberto says

Amazingly thrilled by reading his "Metamorphosis" years ago, I found reading this biography informative and illuminating due to its authoritative narration and eleven rare illustrations, especially in Chapter 1 Life and myth and Chapter 2 Reading Kafka. However, reading Chapters 3, 4, 5 on Bodies, Institutions and The last things, I think, would be a bit demanding so they should interest those searching for in-depth understanding and studies.

Denis says

Good introduction. Confusing at times, but then so was Kafka.

Nathan says

A slow start, but once you get over the initial introduction to 'Kafka the man' and jump into 'Kafka the writer' it kicks off. Robertson does well to steer clear of an academic style for the most part, and puts across clear arguments that outline the core themes shared across Kafka's writings.

I think I read this book at a good time, having already read some of his work, I was in a good place to understand and acknowledge Robertson's examples. But at the same time I'm now better placed to understand Kafka ongoing. I read *The Castle* about 6 months ago and found it very frustrating. Understanding Kafka a bit better now, I'm seeing it in a different light.

Audrey says

Usually I avoid these sorts of "introductions" and especially anything "for dummies," but this is published by the Oxford University Press, so I have high hopes.

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High hopes justified! This was like a mini course on Kafka's life and major themes in his work. On the whole, very helpful.

Derek Collett says

The opening section describing Kafka's life is fascinating and highly informative. The rest of the book, in which the author mostly analyses Kafka's fiction, I found much more problematic. When he writes about work that I have read then I was interested but a lot of the text seemed overly intellectual for a book of this type and quite difficult to follow. Having said that, the book does function as a good general introduction to Kafka.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Kafka: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #115), Ritchie Robertson

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Raghunath Kalpana-Ananth says

I had tried reading Kafka about a year back and couldn't complete.

This book made me revisit Kafka again. The great depth in his literature is explained and contemplated in this introduction. His work really has dizzying depth and very wide scope for personal interpretation.

(I guess this is where David Lynch gets his inspiration from, to be willingly obscure so as to let individual perception of the audience thrive.)

Worthwhile my time. Bought more books of Kafka to read again! :)

Nick says

After reading this I think I understand Kafka's books a bit better and feel motivated to reread them. I have a better sense of his intellectual sources, why his major themes were so important to him, and the historical context. But I also feel very weirdly about Kafka himself, who is the focus of this book. On the one hand, I now dislike him more than I previously did. He is an eminently weak person. He exhibited guilt, indecisiveness and fear. He was privileged, yet anxious. He was like a rich bohemian artist kid who was a disappointment to his family. He sucked with women and was self-loathing. Yet, if you brought any of this up with him he would probably agree with you. He was very self-aware about all of this. And in a way that makes me admire him more. He really embraced his own psychology and laid it bare on the page (although, he did want to have those pages burned, but that notwithstanding...) He was weak, confused, indecisive and frightened on our behalf. Through his suffering, he allows us to occasionally introspect on the negative aspect of our own psychology without fully committing to it like he did. So thanks Kafka, the messiah of horrific existential confusion.

Patrick says

More of a brief conclusion than introduction, presumes you've read it all and then reflects on some recurring themes. Not bad.

Overall I'm glad I read kafka when I did. Not sure what would have happened if I took him up when i was dealing with the same issues of existential unmooring, running up against the absurd etc. It would not have been pretty

Patrick says

p.35-36 The word Kafka uses is Ungeziefer, a much vaguer term meaning 'vermin' or 'a pest,' connoting harmfulness and nastiness rather than identifying any actual creature.

p.56 By inserting the mind of a harrassed employee into the body of a huge insect, Kafka has dramatized the divison between the mind and the body which is a central theme of Western culture.

There are fragments of wonderful close readings and interpretations throughout the work. A thorough treatment is given to all of Kafka's texts. The Metaphorsis is called The Transformation, which is odd, but there are bursts of interesting material about Kafka's most famous story throughout the text.

The chapters are separated by theme, such as "Institutions." Within the chapter the theme will be highlighted for each work of Kafka. A thorough knowledge of all the published works of Kafka is required to enjoy the full breadth and depth of interpretation. Unfortunately for this reader, the information about The Metaphorsis is not centrally located, rather it is scattered throughout the text. The information is fantastic, but jumps around quite a bit. The structure of the chapters will make it more difficult to easily reference the material in the future.

William says

Good reference, especially the chapter on "How to read Kafka."

Matt says

I think the primary purpose of the brief squib I have to contribute to a conversation about this book is an insight of my own: the "a brief insight" series seems to be a repackaging, with hard covers and color illustrations of the previously existing "A Very Short Introduction" series of books. This title, and others in the series, are already remaindered at my local B & N., which can't bode well.

Anyhow, this is interesting. It's a little weird because in spots, Robertson doesn't use the most popular (American) translations, even on the titles-- so what I think of as "Metamorphosis," he calls "Transformation," and etc. Once I figured that out, I felt better about what I was reading.

The sections here seem somewhat arbitrary, in a lot of ways. Each one does serve as kind of an interesting digression into one aspect of Kafka's work, but they are in no way cumulative, which felt at least a little odd.

I don't think I have much fuller an insight into Kafka than I did when I started this book. But I did, in a way, enjoy being in the presence of someone thinking hard about Kafka for a while. And the illustrations, even when they are wacky to the point of laughable irrelevancy to the arguments being made, add some visual splendor to the book.

Jimmy says

Peter Capaldi produced a short film in 1994 called Franz Kafka's *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Kafka never married and went through a few broken relationships. I wonder if it was due to the influence of his reading Kierkegaard.

Gregor Samsa's huge insect is reminiscent of the Georg Heym's poems "War" and "The God of the City."

Kafka refers to man as "the sick animal."

The character of Bucephalus references back to Alexander the Great killing his friend Cleitus with a spear at a banqueting table. A famous drawing is *The Murder of Cleitus* by Andre Castaigne. Alexander is missed in Kafka's world because he could point everyone to "the gates of India" which may be a new world.

Kafka means "jackdaw" in Czech. So he introduces many jackdaws, crows, and ravens in his work.

On his deathbed, Kafka asked for euthanasia, "If you don't kill me, you're a murderer."

In Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Hans Castorp sees an x-ray image of his own hand. At once, he is alienated from his own body. He sees a skeleton whose flesh will die away. He accepts his own mortality.

Kafka exercised twice daily, naked, in front of an open window. He learned to swim and became a vegetarian, very radical for that time. He followed a new theory about how to chew food. He spent two weeks at a nudist colony where harmony was sought between body and soul.

The Herero uprising in southwest Africa and the Dreyfus unjust imprisonment on Devil's Island may have been the starters for In the Penal Colony. Herero prisoners had their crime carved into their skin with needles.

Kafka compares humans to trees. It looks like we can be moved but we are firmly attached to the ground.

In the story "A Message From the Emperor", it concludes with dreaming up a message from the "emperor." The emperor is god. Like Nietzsche has said, God is dead. We still want a divine message, so we make one up ourselves.

Kafka visited Martin Buber in Berlin and asked him about the "unjust judges" in Psalm 82. Many intriguing similarities between the judges and doorkeepers of the Kabbalah and those in The Trial.

Lydia Wednesday says

I don't care for philosophy. I don't really care for Kafka.

However, this was a well written miniature biography of Kafka and I found it informative, unbiased, and easy to read. For all of my incredible lack of interest in the subject matter itself, I found Robertson's writing to be the only thing that really kept me engaged. What I took away from this book is that I still find Kafka tedious and annoying. I will definitely be on the lookout of any of Robertson's books in the future though.
