

Murray, Nicholas. *Kafka: A Biography*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. 432 pp. 31 illustrations. \$30.00 cloth.

Biographies of Franz Kafka have become so common that their publication seems self-evident: a sub-genre whose further propagation requires no particular explanation. Gone are the days when a Kafka biography needed to rationalize its existence by pointing out the limitations of existing works and the originality of its new approach. The present book, as its generic title hints, does not introduce any major discoveries, revisions, or otherwise surprising new perspectives to what is known about Kafka's life. (The press release justifies the book as "the first biography of Kafka in English for 20 years," but even this is not correct.) Nonetheless, for the general reader Murray has produced an excellent book: well informed, sensitive, and highly readable.

The major strength of this biography lies in the pervasive fairness and sound judgment of its account. Those characteristics may sound modest or old-fashioned, but it is no small feat to maneuver between the stereotypes and myths that have accumulated around Kafka's life. Murray does this with considerable skill: Kafka appears here neither as the representative man of modernist alienation, nor as the prophet of impending social catastrophe, nor as a guilt-ridden neurotic. Rather, Murray's Kafka is a fascinating and attractive individual who was able to produce works of genius out of and despite his complex emotional constitution. This refreshing tone is set early on: Murray writes that "...to see Kafka as a quivering neurasthenic, someone who knew only how to suffer, would be a travesty. [...] However much he was tormented by private fears and lonely anxieties, he was loved by all who came into contact with him" (4-5). Certainly, the

fears and the fletcherizing are all here, but Murray scrupulously avoids condescension and often follows such incidents with a corrective comment, such as when he balances accounts of some of Kafka's more ascetic personal habits with observations about his occasionally bold romantic encounters (48), or balances Kafka's merciless view of his own emotional failures with a litany of Kafka's very real accomplishments at particular moments (79 and 153). This fairness extends to those figures who often cut a less than flattering figure in Kafka biographies; thus Murray ends a description of the *Letter to the Father* with the laconic remark: "One would very much like to hear from the other side" (37).

There are occasional glosses that jar. Describing the socio-cultural make-up of late Habsburg Bohemia, for example, Murray writes that "the rural Sudeten Germans [...] were probably just as much alienated from the Prague Germans and their cosmopolitan, avant-garde tastes as were the Czechs" (24), implying that Czech society produced only self-engrossed nationalism and had no cosmopolitan or avant-garde artists of its own. The later, implicit equation of Kafka's remorseless "hectoring" of Felice Bauer with "the rabbinical side of Kafka" (211) is also unfortunate. But such moments stand out as exceptions within a text characterized by remarkably balanced assessments.

Murray's account is highly focused on the figure of Kafka himself. While he provides succinct and (for the most part) accurate sketches of social or historical contexts when needed, this is a "life" rather than "life and times" biography. Kafka's closest friends—Oskar Baum, Felix Weltsch, even Max Brod—appear only when absolutely necessary for the account of Kafka. Titling the divisions of the book after the names of women who were particularly influential at certain periods of Kafka's life—the major

sections are “Prague,” “Felice,” “Milena,” and “Dora”—does not so much widen the account as transform those women into symbols of the phases of Kafka’s life.

Murray is well informed of recent developments in the secondary literature on Kafka, although he does not flaunt his research. Footnotes are terse, and there is no bibliography. In general his sources are canonical: the diaries, letters, and primary works themselves. Even the decision to exclude Gustav Janouch as a source is unsurprising. This streamlining clearly reflects the biography’s being intended for general readership rather than a scholarly audience. Indeed, the general reader looking for a fair and readable account of Kafka’s life will find Murray’s biography extremely rewarding.

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