Kafkaesque: the very word evokes tortuous bureaucracy, crushing self-doubt, and an almost unbearable inadequacy in the face of higher powers. After Kafka, it can be said, literature was not the same. In the few novels and short stories he left behind, he distilled the horrors of the new age. Kafka is the voice of the outsider—that is, the voice of each one of us—at once defined by its affiliations and completely, utterly alone.

The product of both a transitional age (the beginning of the 20th century) and a territory in flux (Czechoslovakia), Kafka spoke and wrote German in Czech territory. He was a Jew among Christians, a non-observant Jew among believers. Louis Begley, himself a multilingual exile and, like Kafka, a lawyer and writer, renders Kafka's life with sensitivity and insight. Begley's discussion of Kafka's masterpiece The Trial, along with shorter works such as The Metamorphosis, opens a window on a tormented soul, one of the most intriguing figures of the modern period.

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My Personal Review:
Thanks largely to Max Brod and scores of subsequent literary commentators who read Franz Kafka through Beckettesque lenses, the image of Kafka most of us grew up with is of a tortured, self-loathing,
desperately unhappy and hopelessly ill prophet who'd looked into the abyss, recognized the futility of existence and the absence of God, and tried to write about it in allegorical tales in which he's usually the thinly disguised protagonist. Given this settled picture of who Kafka is and what he's all about, plowing through one of his books can be a pretty grim task, unbearably heavy, dark, gloomy.

The virtue of Louis Begley's The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head is that he helps us take a fresh look at the author whom the "Kafkaesque" school of interpreters has almost ruined for many of us. Relying heavily on Kafka's own words in his journals and letters, Begley invites us to re-think Kafka. In the first place, he allows us to see that Kafka's personal life wasn't the ubiquitously dark and tragic closet thing it's commonly thought to be. Kafka was as capable of laughter, frivolity, calm, and immersion in the quotidian as the rest of us. He was well-known rather than reclusive during his lifetime, and entered with gusto into the wrangles and feuds typical of the literati. (Kafka tells us, for example, that he hates fellow author Franz Werfel because of his wealth, health, and youth.)

Second, Begley argues that there's an "intrinsic and unshakable humanism" in Kafka's work that is frequently overlooked by commentators and readers who've been trained to see his work as exclusively allegorical, darkly religious (or perhaps anti-religious), and politically prophetic. This doesn't mean that the dark side isn't in Kafka. It obviously is. It's just to say that it ought not be the one standard by which we read and judge his work.

Finally, Begley worries that these ideological readings of Kafka disregard in an almost total way the very thing that Kafka most wanted to be known for: the aesthetic value of his work. Kafka was a craftsman of the highest order who would labor mightily--some might say obsessively--over single sentences and paragraphs. He had a message he wanted to convey, naturally. But he also wanted to chisel beautiful word sculptures.

After reading Begley's book, I had two responses. First, I realized, with a great sense of relief and liberation, just how Brodbeaten I've been for years, and how Brod's gloomy interpretations of Kafka have diminished rather than enhanced my ability to appreciate Kafka--so much so, to be honest, that it's been years since I've even tried to read him. Second, Begley's book prompted me walk over to my bookshelf, take down The Trial, blow the dust off it, and begin anew.

What more could one ask from a book about Kafka?

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