Why You Should Read Kafka Before You Waste Your Life by James Hawes

A New Take On Kafka

Everybody knows the face of Franz Kafka, whether they have read any of his works or not. And that brooding face carries instant images: bleak and threatening visions of an inescapable bureaucracy, nightmarish transformations, uncanny predictions of the Holocaust. But while Kafka’s genius is beyond question, the image of a mysterious, sickly, shadowy figure who was scarcely known in his own lifetime bears no resemblance to the historical reality. Franz Kafka was a popular and well-connected millionaire’s son who enjoyed good-time girls, brothels, and expensive porn, who landed a highly desirable state job that pulled in at least $90,000 a year in today’s dollars for a six-hour day, who remained a loyal member of Prague’s German-speaking Imperial elite right to the end, and whose work was backed by a powerful literary clique.

Here are some of the prevalent Kafka myths:

*Kafka was the archetypal genius neglected in his lifetime.

*Kafka was lonely.

*Kafka was stuck in a dead-end job, struggling to find time to write.

*Kafka was tormented by fear of sex.

*Kafka was unbendingly honest about himself to the women in his life – too honest.

*Kafka had a terrible, domineering father who had no understanding of his son’s needs.

*Kafka’s style is mysterious and opaque.
James Hawes wants to tear down the critical walls which generations of gatekeepers---scholars, biographers, and tourist guides---have built up around Franz Kafka, giving us back the real man and the real significance of his splendid works. And hell take no prisoners in the process.

My Personal Review: 
The zealous title of this book gives an idea of its flaws. It really doesn't give a solid suggestion as to why you should read Kafka before you waste your life, or why your life would be wasted if you didn't read Kafka. As other reviewers here have pointed out, it is a bit thin on citations, and Hawes really likes italics. Especially in its last half, it is absolutely riddled with typographical errors (some to the point of robbing the sentence of its meaning) where the author and more probably the editor became lazy.

That said, I consider this book so important that it deserves five stars regardless. The highly negative (though clearly intelligent) reviewers seem to have missed something in the book. I will admit, however, that I am a pedestrian (obsessive) Kafka fan and I am in no way educated on Kafka.

Hawes very acutely inspects all these myths surrounding Kafka, grouped together as "the K.-myth," and he...well, solves them. Readers versed in Kafka's biography may feel that Hawes is simplifying things, but his thesis is essentially that Kafka should be approached without the assumptions that, arguably, most readers of Kafka or of works on Kafka hold. When I say that Hawes solves the myths, I mean that he makes some incredible (and in my opinion groundbreaking) connections, using the Diaries, the letters, works on Kafka, and history, that give very sensible explanations for what has historically been regarded as inexplicable.

I can imagine Hawes thinking that this title was just so delicious that he couldn't possibly bear to name this book anything else, but it's not really appropriate to what the book does. I would expect the book to be most enjoyable to people who have read Kafka and who are familiar with his life, and it's written in such a way that I could imagine a lot of it being confusing for someone who doesn't know Kafka.

This book isn't a biography of the life of Kafka, nor will it make those unfamiliar with Kafka shout, "I must read Kafka now!", and it doesn't do the usual plumbing of the depths of the twisted darkness that is Kafka's life and writing. Instead, it works out the kinks, gives fascinating and logical explanations for all the Kafka-muck that readers love to get lost in, and disproves a lot of assumptions about Kafka's life and works.
I guess it depends on what Kafka is to you: if you think you have Kafka figured out (in only the most Kafkaesque way of the acceptance of the impossibility of ever figuring him out at all), you'll probably hate this book. If you're interested in Kafka and want to get your world completely turned upside-down, it's essential.

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