



Selected Short Stories

Franz Kafka , Edwin Muir (Editor) , Willa Muir (Editor)

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Franz Kafka's enigmatic, deadpan, and deeply pessimistic stories are central to literary modernism. In 'The Metamorphosis', the estrangement of everyday life becomes corporealized when Gregor Samsa wakes up as a giant bug and wonders how he is going to get to work on time. Kafka inverts the implied degradation of a man's transformation into an animal in 'A Report of the Academy', an ape's address to a group of scientists.

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Eliot Parulidae says

"How much my life has changed, and yet how unchanged it has remained at bottom!"

- opening sentence, "Investigations of a Dog"

"But all remained unchanged."

- closing sentence, "The Burrow"

The ordinary American knows Franz Kafka as the guy who wrote the story where the dude turns into a bug. This is fair; he did indeed write the story where the dude turns into a bug, and that iconic tale of alienation and existential horror is included in the Modern Library's *Selected Short Stories of Franz Kafka* (how, indeed, would they have gotten away with leaving it out?)

One can certainly appreciate the majesty of "The Metamorphosis" in isolation, but it is only one of fifteen works in this edition. Reading multiple Kafka stories allows for a finer appreciation of the ideas over which the author obsessed: social isolation, totalitarianism, intergenerational conflict, self-starvation, the terrifying power of music, the ultimate and absolute triumph of death, the link between curiosity and unhappiness, and, most of all, the inability of individuals to change their lives. Kafka is where inspiration goes to die. He dismisses out-of-hand the conventional wisdom that one can and should learn from one's experiences; disaster strikes without warning, and characters seeking explanations for their plight run into blank walls of unknowing. This is deep pessimism, the kind that rings disconcertingly true even if it is incompatible with a so-called normal life. My life is more normal than I care to admit, and I cannot promise that I've absorbed Kafka. Even the Italian author Primo Levi, who had a year in Auschwitz at his back, claimed that Kafka laid down more truth than he cared to endure.

But one could name other pessimists. What makes Kafka tragic rather than just surly is his innocence, exemplified by his inclination to write animal fables, stories in simple language about beetles, dogs, mice, and other critters. The protagonist of "A Report to an Academy" is *an intelligent ape who wears trousers*. One could call it Disney minus the Prozac. Poor Kafka knew the wounded child in all of us.

Highly recommended.

Harsimran Khural says

I loved the book when I started reading it. As I progressed through the book, the quality (IMHO) gradually deteriorated till I couldn't even finish the last three stories. I would rather recommend the following Kafka stories that mostly form the first half of the book instead of reading the whole book and diluting your experience:

- 1) The Judgment
- 2) In the penal colony
- 3) The Hunger Artist (My favorite!)
- 4) The Great Wall of China
- 5) The Metamorphosis

Jamie says

I can't remember what show, but my husband was watching some show on TV and they mentioned Kafka or his works. The show mentioned (or maybe he looked into it afterwards) that Kafka can be very depressing, but there is also a slight humor to a lot of his works and an art in them. My husband, from the TV show, thought he might appreciate this humor- despite the tragic/depressing parts and rented some from the library. I have made a goal to be more well-read and to be more rounded in my choice of literature. So I started reading them as well. Franz Kafka was a Jew in Germany, who had a hard life, from what I have found. He may have died before the Jews faced their biggest trials in WWII, but thinking about it, I'm sure their persecution didn't start then. Kafka may have faced poverty, ridicule, any number of things, but his works, even when depressing have value and have lessons that can be learned from them.

The Judgment: This first story I'm not sure if I understood the point of it. It seems two people are affected by a tragedy and one thinks he is the only one moving on, and becomes quite selfish. The other one takes advantage of the first's complete obliviousness to things not concerning himself and prepares for the ruin of the first. The part I don't get is the second says he loves the first and then commands the first to drown himself, and then the willingness of the first to do so. Maybe the first WAS so selfish that the humiliation of NOT being able to achieve everything he thought was too much to live with. Whatever the case, I did not like it very much.

The Metamorphosis: My husband tells me that Franz Kafka himself got tuberculosis, but in the end died of starvation. At times I feel this story has some semblance of an autobiography. I did find most of it amusing- even if just the way he described certain things. Within the first paragraphs of the story you find that he has been changed into some sort of beetle and is on its back. I can picture a bug on its back struggling to get back upright, and although it is sad, the way he describes it makes the picture in my head seem quite funny. There are many things in this book. The need to fit in, feelings of being outcast, feeling useless, other themes as well.

In the Penal Colony: This one I also liked. It's based around a torture device that is very inhumane. To me it emphasizes many things, including the right to a fair trial. The need to be innocent until proven guilty instead of guilty first. Considering Kafka was a Jew, I read this one and actually thought of Hitler and the concentration camps. I related Hitler to the Old Commandant. But Kafka died in 1924- before Hitler and his concentration camps and persecution of the Jews (though I assume there had been persecution before, though different). It also, to me, emphasizes the need for us to stand up for things we believe in, that we feel are right, no matter how we feel they may be received.

The Great Wall of China: This one is an essay that starts out about building the wall of China. Then in the middle it talks about the citizens of China in the southeast (I believe). Then comes back to the wall of China. It wasn't my favorite story, but was well done, in that a German is a Chinese man, and from what I know of its citizens, is pretty accurate. It reminded me that the wall may have been, not only to keep Mongols out, but foreign influences, that were considered an enemy to and threat to the Chinese culture. I did like a quote in it: "Try with all your might to comprehend the decrees of the high command, but only up to a certain point; then avoid further meditation. A very wise maxim, which moreover was elaborated in a parable that was later often quoted: Avoid further meditation, but not because it might be harmful; it is not at all certain that it

would be harmful. What is harmful or not harmful has nothing to do with the question. Consider rather the river in spring. It rises until it grows mightier and nourishes more richly the soil on the long stretch of its banks, still maintaining its own course until it reaches the sea, where it is all the more welcome because it is a worthier ally.--Thus far may you urge your meditations on the decrees of the high command.--But after that the river overflows its banks, loses outline and shape, slows down the speed of its current, tries to ignore its destiny by forming little seas in the interior of the land, damages the fields and yet cannot maintain itself for long in its new expanse, but must run back between its banks again, must even dry up wretchedly in the hot season that presently follows.--Thus far may you not urge your meditations on the decrees of the high command." (p. 136-137) I am one to "over-meditate" something, and therefore, I'm not sure if I completely agree, but I do agree with the logic behind this quote. I'll have to think more on it.

A Country Doctor: In this story, a country doctor is trying to save one person, but no one is willing to help the doctor. And then he ends up with two people that need his help in two different places, he can't fully help either one and ends up sick himself. If we don't take care of ourselves, we can't help anyone. And the tragic-ness of not being able to be in two places at once. The need for others to sometimes help- especially to one who probably has helped us or our families at one point or another.

A Common Confusion: I liked this story, and I feel most people can relate. It has to do with missing someone or an opportunity. But it also talked about being so busy that we miss something and the importance to make time for the important things. Really short story (a page and a half?). It refers to the two main people as A and B and the two destinations as H and home. One quote: "At home he [A] learns that B had arrived quite early, immediately after A's departure, indeed that he had met A on the threshold and reminded him of his business; but A had replied that he had no time to spare, he must go at once."

The New Advocate: Another really short story. This one seems a bit philosophical. It seems reminiscent of the great days with Alexander the Great and one blazing a trail to India. And then seems to say, all we need now is people who study books (specifically law books here).

An Old Manuscript: His second story where he is now a Chinese citizen. This one in its capital outside the Emperor's palace. It talks about foreigners within the city and I actually like the last quote, as a summary of the story. ""What is going to happen?" we all ask ourselves. "How long can we endure this burden and torment? The Emperor's palace has drawn the nomads here but does not know how to drive them away again. The gate stays shut; the guards, who used to be always marching out and in with ceremony, keep close behind barred windows. It is left to us artisans and tradesmen to save our country; but we are not equal to such a task; nor have we ever claimed to be capable of it. This is a misunderstanding of some kind; and it will be the ruin of us.""

A Fratricide: I liked this short story about a murder. It talks about a person who watches the whole thing but doesn't do anything about it. It reminds me of our need to be involved in things sometimes. There was a story once in New York where a girl was being stabbed and killed and yelling for help, yet no one stopped to help. Some people stood watching, but no one lifted a finger. I once heard someone speculate that today with youtube and our cell phones, we might stand there and videotape the event, thinking maybe we'll be the first one to report it and get fame, but no one would lift a finger to actually help and intervene. If we were in that situation, would we try and prevent a crime? Would we even take the time to call the police so someone else can help?

A Report to an Academy: I really liked this story about an ape who becomes human. I mean he still has fur, but he overcomes his ape side and becomes civilized. This story analyzes, not freedom, but the need to have some direction to move. Somewhere to go, even if there is no freedom to choose which way to go, one

direction to move is good. It talks about the need for motivation to move and I think gives a good example of overcoming adversity, trials, flaws in our own character. In this, the ape is not resentful, but he does not look at his act of being civilized as right. He does not feel other apes should seek to do the same, in fact he feels pity for one chimp, but for him, he felt it was necessary and he does not regret what he did.

I have now finished and will try to finish giving brief summaries of the last few stories.

The Hunter Gracchus: Starts out very descriptive, almost felt like the beginning of a novel. It was short and curious. I don't know if I understood the intended message, but it's about a hunter who befalls some tragedy and then is cursed to roam the earth on a boat. Never able to linger long, not able to receive help or eternal rest. I kinda liked it, but it definitely wasn't my favorite.

A Hunger Artist: This one has to do with a man who fasts for a living. I want to say that Kafka died of starvation, but I could be wrong. Anyways, there are times when he seems to glorify fasting or starvation. This seems like one of those times, except the character dies at the end, very frail and pitiful. He wants to make a new record for fasting and insists he can go "one more day" until by death he is stopped. It talks of very many things relating to fasting, but it seems to miss the point for me. I realize Kafka was a Jew- so he did not believe in Christ's teachings as fact, but to me Christ tells us what fasting should be when he talks about how hypocrites fast and make sure people know it and it is for the glory of men and not for God's help as it should be. (St. Matthew chapter 6). In conclusion, I think this story helps emphasize what I have noticed as a trend of Kafka's to focus on fasting and starvation, but it wasn't my favorite.

Investigations of a Dog: I thought this had way too many side notes and didn't make one clear point. It seemed to me that his main investigation has to do with, once again, starvation. The dog thought he saw food that didn't fall to the ground but followed him through the air and pursued him. So he decides that he must starve himself to see if food will come to him. But when he first noticed this phenomena he was not starving, so why he felt the need to starve himself to try his experiment is beyond me, besides the fact that Kafka was intrigued by starving and/or fasting. It is very philosophical in nature and doesn't really reach any conclusions. Luckily the dog does not die, he is too tempted by food and therefore his experiment failed.

The Burrow: I'll admit, I think I spent too much time while reading this trying to figure out which animal, precisely, was being depicted. It doesn't much matter though. It talks of a safety net. It talks of a treasured area, and getting distracted, not thinking things through, allowing danger to enter, and then becoming to scared to think through things logically. I can relate in many ways, looking back on this story and although I didn't like it much while reading it, I think I like it more when thinking about the message it was trying to convey.

Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk: This one insists that mice do not sing or like music, except for that which comes from Josephine. I kinda liked this one, though I'm not sure if I got the intended message. It talks of how she craves attention, wants to be listened to, feels her message is vital to all mice. It talks of how entranced all mice are with her voice, and spends a little bit of time going into how she may or may not make those sounds, that no other mouse can.

Overall I liked these stories. They weren't all intriguing, and so it wasn't the fastest read for me, but I feel there are good points in at least most of the stories, and good messages, even with the tragic, and sometimes weird endings.

Piyush Sharma says

Kafka is itself a research subject. His stories are so deep that they leave you to think endlessly. I love few stories - in the penal colony, a country doctor, a report to an academy, a hunger artist, the burrow and metamorphosis

Evie says

When a client says he relates to a particular writer and/or a particular story, you'd better damn well read it. If you're in the mood to feel isolated and depressed, or maybe have a hankering to slit your wrists, Kafka is the man for you. His classic story of a man waking up as a dung beetle? Shyeah, how many times have I felt like that in my life? Check! A man living with an overbearing parent? Um...Check! A doctor whose life's work goes unrewarded and under-appreciated? At the very least, I can imagine it.

There are some other stories that I'm having trouble getting through, so I'm going to have to give this 3 stars for right now. I found the Penal Colony unnecessarily long, but then again, so were Melville's description of the the whale, and I love that book. I may just have to read Colony again. Pick up the book, if just for The Metamorphosis and The Judgement. Maybe the others'll grow on me.

Seema Dubey says

Kafka, isnt easy to read, I knew, having read 'The Trial' eons back. But, what was most confounding were the pages and pages long paragraphs. In this Bullet Point age!? Droning on and on, breathlessly, relentlessly.

Read through the book 'coz wanted to finish it.

Kafka had mastered the art of focussing on a miniscule point of everyday life and dissects, scrutinizes, dives deep into the nuances... But, a story? That is rarely there. I like my 'stories' to have a beginning, a middle and an end. If your interest is to zoom in into an everyday occurrence, or an instance; then Kafka is your writer. Not for me. Give me the larger picture and the subtleties. I found Kafka extremely tedious. Perhaps, decades back, still raw about human psyche I might have enjoyed the learning, but today, its just, well, I said it, 'tedious'.

Some stories are slightly better than others, but overall its not exactly Roald Dahl, Somerset Maugham or even Jeffery Archer (seriously, at least his stories have an exciting twist)!!

For instance 'Metamorphosis' might have been a path breaking story of its time, but after reading through cutting edge science fiction and watching intelligent, imaginative sci fi movies, 'What is going on?' was the only question hovering in my mind. Why did the man turn into a giant roach? I am not doubting Kafka's ability to handle the subject that he writes about masterfully. But, his stories held no relevance for me. They

are not timeless. There were stories narrated by a dog, a burrow animal and a baboon (or was it a chimp?). I did not find much 'Animal Farm-isque' sensibility either!

Is there a Kafka Appreciation Book somewhere? May be one needs read that before attempting a Kafka. 'Coz on their own these stories only made me somnolent!

Vanessa says

Like so many things, I can't believe it took me until my 30s. I've often felt a bit in the dark when faced with a Kafka reference but just never got around to reading him. I'm glad I finally had. While I didn't love each story some are so enjoyable that as a whole this collection is very worth reading. I knew the rough story of the Metamorphosis but in its entirety is very engaging. In the Penal Colony is so random (which is wonderful) and I enjoyed the Burrow so much that I can't even quite explain why. Highly recommend a read.

Neeti Rajagopalan says

Two stars only for "Metamorphosis" and "In The Penal Colony".

Z Wang says

goat

"Alas," said the mouse, "the world gets smaller every day. At first it was so wide that I ran along and was happy to see walls appearing to my right and left, but these high walls converged so quickly that I'm already in the last room, and there in the corner is the trap into which I must run."

"But you've only got to run the other way," said the cat, and ate it.

Katarina says

Kafka je báječný. Mám moc ráda jeho krátké povídky (úplně nejvíc část Rozjímání) - tu je vždy v rozestupu několik let a pokaždé v nich najdu něco nového a pořád se mi tolik líbí.

Anisha Das says

When has Kafka been disappointing?

Sowmya says

"Metamorphosis" which I had read earlier is still my favorite. The most curious story is "The Burrow". It is refreshing in a way to read 25 pages or so about a suspected malingerer in denial, metaphor-ized through endless descriptions of digging.

All his stories, are similarly fluent in describing a single instance that may have passed us by without impressing, perhaps because of its apparent insignificance in our daily lives.

Kafka delights in bringing to focus the very thing we consider insignificant and drawing it out or questioning the surreal like in "A Country Doctor" or the raw criminality of the human brain like in the story "A Fratricide".

The second favorite of mine was "The Judgement". It brings to mind the one fact that is perhaps the reason why most 'good folks' don't succeed when they should, that is being overly self critical, needlessly due to a false sense of doing good or a well intentioned but often misplaced sense of being 'morally right'. It is also a wonder to note that this is still relevant today.

Og Maciel says

Though I knew what "The Metamorphosis" was about I had never actually read Kafka before. It was one of those things that I had always meant to do but never managed to find the time and/or inspiration to get it done. So last month I came across this collection of some of his short stories and finally added it to the top of my reading list.

Most of the stories included in this book will give you a good taste of the paranoia and bizarreness that are usually associated with Kafka's style. "In the Penal Colony" is dark, "A Country Doctor" is a bit surreal and strange, "The Judgement" is just straight out odd with an ending that left me wondering if I had missed something, and "The Metamorphosis" is comical (despite what happens to Gregor Samsa, the main character, his family's attempt at continuing a 'normal' life is amusing), entertaining and gross. Had this book included only these stories, I'd probably given this book a much higher rating.

My biggest issue with this book is with the inclusion of three stories, namely "Investigations of a Dog", "The Burrow" and "Josephine the Singer". These stories share the common trait that their main characters are animals talking about their personal lives, issues and paranoias. I felt that the stories were a bit repetitive (the character in "The Burrow" going over and over his plans on how to check all the compartments on his home, or the dog asking "Whence does the Earth procure its food?") and just too long. I'm sure that if you're a big Kafka scholar and enjoy looking for examples of how his stories are filled with themes of paranoia and psychological conflicts, then you'll definitely enjoy these stories. For me they were boring and no matter how hard I tried to find the beauty in them, I almost gave up on the entire book many times.

Edward Canade says

Well this is Kafka, and it is a pretty mixed collection. His better known are better known for a reason. Those are his more universally appealing and for me better written works. He does drone on and on, intentionally having a single paragraph cover multiple pages. I enjoyed revisiting some of my favorites which I read in my youth. Some of the others which I had never read made me wonder if Kafka had those in mind when he requested his friend burn his manuscripts after his death. -Just kidding.- But reading his stories came make you feel like a dung beetle, so perhaps he is to be viewed, in the end, as succeeding in achieving the desired effect.

Sean Glover says

I read "Metamorphosis" and "The Penal Colony." Both are excellent short stories to exemplify eccentricity. I wonder why Kafka's characters always seem to die. Especially that bug in the metamorphosis, why did he die before he could transform. Compare this to Kafka, who depending on what you think is a butterfly sharing his gift (of beauty, imagination, mind...) with the world or is forever a caterpillar who lived a lifetime before his gift was truly appreciated or before his gift was shared. In a metaphorical world, what is the affect of constant preoccupation with wondering whether one remains a caterpillar, remains in the chrysalis/cocoon stage, or is actually being a butterfly. To say that Kafka thought any of this is purely conjecture. Kafka is great reading no matter the weather, too hot or too plain, snow, wind rain.
