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Peer reviewed

**Ulrich Plass, *Franz Kafka* Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2009.**

This recent addition to the many reference works on Franz Kafka offers a brief introduction to Kafka's person and, more importantly, provides a helpful guide to the daunting quantity of secondary scholarship available. In the preface, Plass offers a brief overview of the field, tracing the relatively recent move away from purely text-immanent approaches to Kafka. Approvingly, Plass lists a number of works from the last two decades that follow this trend of integrating literary criticism with cultural studies with an emphasis on recent work. His book is clearly meant to introduce students to the rich and multifaceted body of Kafka scholarship.

Each chapter begins with a helpful chapter summary (in an already very concise book), and is then further divided into subheadings. The commentary is broken up by occasional longer block quotations in Kafka's own voice, excerpted from diaries, letters and literary works. Plass includes one or two suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, as well as a complete bibliography at the back.

The first chapter, "Ein Leben am Schreibtisch," presents general biographical information and notes on Kafka's correspondence. Highlights include Kafka's relationships to Max Brod and Felice Bauer, alongside the well-known father-son conflict, including an analysis of "Brief an den Vater." Typical for Plass' style, some original analysis is added to a dense summary of the latest scholarship. The last section, "Am Schreibtisch—im Bett," leans on the work of Canetti and Kittler to thematize the site of writing in Kafka's work.

Chapter Two provides a list of the major Kafka editions available, and a description of each with pros and cons. This chapter is especially useful to students beginning work on Kafka, unsure which edition would be most suitable (for example, the *Historisch-Kritische Kafka-Ausgabe* is recommended for those interested in Kafka's original handwriting and editorial process). Recent interest in Kafka's method of writing and penmanship is directly dealt with in the last subsection.

Chapter Three focuses on writing as a theme in Kafka's work: the staging of writing, and the self-referentiality of language. In this chapter, Plass also carries out his own reading of "Das Urteil," emphasizing the ambivalence between beginning and end and the role of the author relative to writing. Plass's few close readings such as this provide relief from the otherwise citation-heavy introductory genre.

Chapter Four takes up the interrelation between Kafka's literary and professional writing. For example, Plass notes the influence of the statistical character of insurance protocols on Kafka's fictional writing.

Chapter Five deals with Judaism, including subsections on Yiddish translation, Yiddish theater, and the idea of the messiah in Kafka. Here Plass recapitulates Deleuze and Guattari's thesis of a "minor literature."

Chapters Six through Eight take up different sets of often-mentioned

themes in Kafka's work. Here Plass blends close textual readings with various biographical and socio-historical approaches. Chapter Six is a discussion of scholarship centered on questions of law, power, and the institution, with interpretations of *Der Process*. Plass draws upon work by Agamben, Benjamin, Campe, and Vismann, among others. Chapter Seven, "Schuld und Strafe," introduces readers to another cluster of interrelated themes: guilt and innocence, (il)legitimate punishment, torture, and the topos of deportation. The last chapter, "Hungern und Pfeifen: Kafkas letzte Gedanken zum Kunst," offers a detailed analysis of the portrayal of art and artists in Kafka's work. Particularly impressive is Plass's own interpretation of "Ein Hungerkünstler," in which the short story is used to call into question the assumed criteria used to define art as art. He argues that Kafka exposes the border between art and non-art, revealing the fragility of this distinction.

In summary, this slim introductory volume offers a convenient guide to those beginning scholarly work on Kafka. The structure, as well as the writing style, are clear and accessible and will help prepare students for more advanced research in this field. In directing students towards some of the more ground-breaking literature, Plass supplies helpful bibliographic entry points for further reading. Importantly, by pointing out recent methodological as well as thematic trends, this book signals possibilities for continued innovation and interpretation.

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