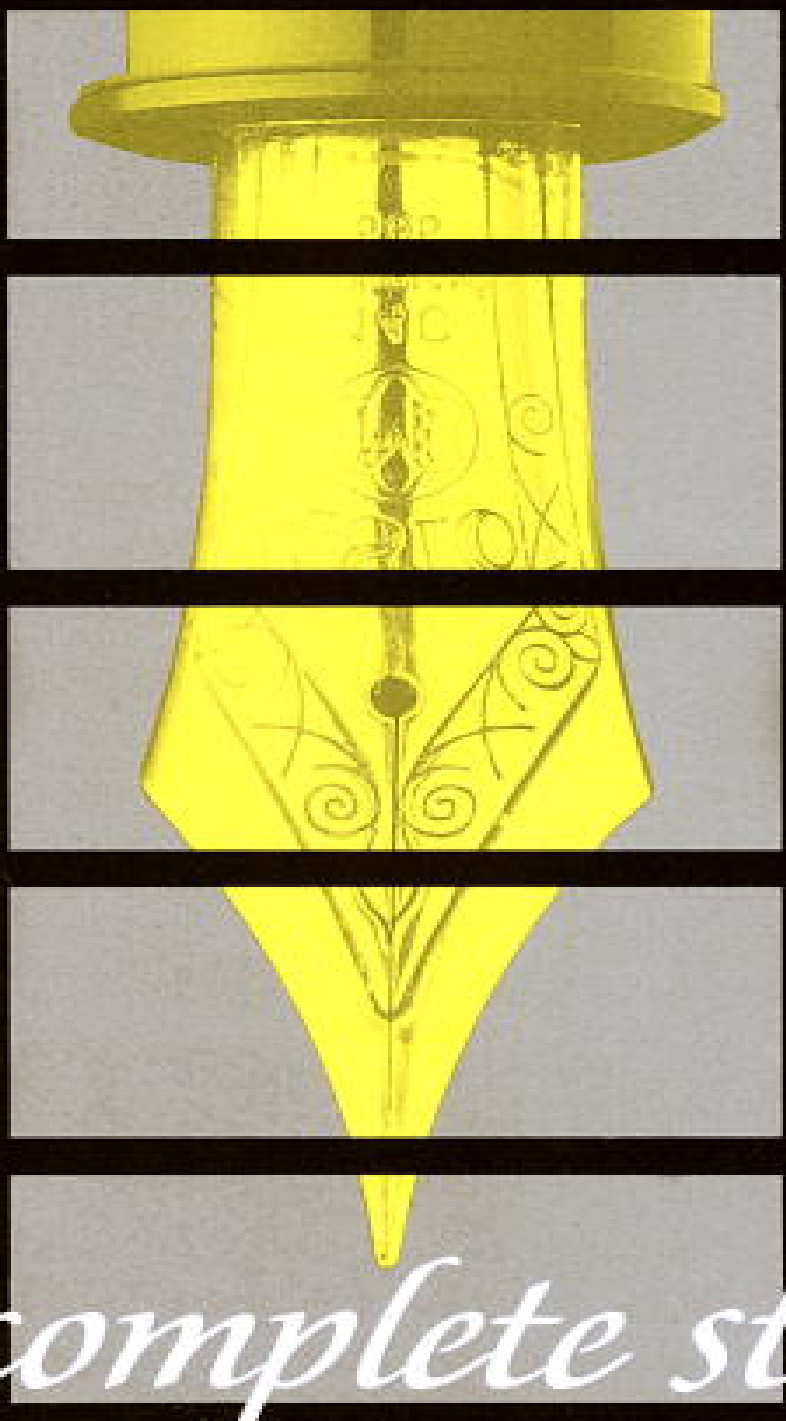
franz kafka



the complete stories

FOREWORD BY JOHN UPDIKE

The Complete Stories

Franz Kafka

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FOREWORD

By John Updike

All that he does seems to him, it is true, extraordinarily new, but also, because of the incredible spate of new things, extraordinarily amateurish, indeed scarcely tolerable, incapable of becoming history, breaking short the chain of the generations, cutting off for the first time at its most profound source the music of the world, which before him could at least be divined. Sometimes in his arrogance he has more anxiety for the world than for himself.

— KAFKA, "He" (Aphorisms)

THE century since Franz Kafka was born has been marked by the idea of "modernism" — a self-consciousness new among centuries, a consciousness of being new. Sixty years after his death, Kafka epitomizes one aspect of this modern mind-set: a sensation of anxiety and shame whose center cannot be located and therefore cannot be placated; a sense of an infinite difficulty within things, impeding every step; a sensitivity acute beyond usefulness, as if the nervous system, flayed of its old hide of social usage and religious belief, must record every touch as pain. In Kafka's peculiar and highly original case this dreadful quality is mixed with immense tenderness, oddly good humor, and a certain severe and reassuring formality. The combination makes him an artist; but rarely can an artist have struggled against greater inner resistance and more sincere diffidence as to the worth of his art.

This volume holds all of the fiction that Kafka committed to publication during his lifetime:* a slender sheaf of mostly very short stories, the longest of them, "The Metamorphosis," a mere fifty pages long, and only a handful of the others as much as five thousand words. He published six slim volumes, four of them single stories, from 1913 to 1919, and was working on the proofs of a seventh in the sanatorium where he died on June 3rd, 1924, of tuberculosis, exactly one month short of his forty-first

birthday. Among his papers after his death were found several notes addressed to his closest friend, Max Brod. One of them stated:

> Of all my writings the only books that can stand are these: *The Judgment, The Stoker, Metamorphosis, Penal Colony, Country Doctor* and the short story: *Hunger-Artist.* . . . When I say that those five books and the short story can stand, I do not mean that I wish them to be reprinted and handed down to posterity. On the contrary, should they disappear altogether that would please me best. Only, since they do exist, I do not wish to hinder anyone who may want to, from keeping them.

* The single exception is "The Stoker," published as *Der Heizer, Ein Fragment* in 1913 but now incorporated, in German and in English, as the first chapter of Kafka's unfinished novel *Amerika.*

The little canon that Kafka reluctantly granted posterity would, indeed, stand; "The Metamorphosis" alone would assure him a place in world literature, though undoubtedly a less prominent place than he enjoys thanks to the mass of his posthumously published novels, tales, parables, aphorisms, and letters. The letter quoted above went on to direct Brod to burn all of Kafka's manuscripts, "without exception and preferably unread." Another note, written later, reiterated the command even more emphatically; and Dora Dymant, the young woman with whom Kafka shared the last year of his life, obediently did destroy those portions of the Kafka hoard within her keeping. But Brod disobeyed. Predictably: while Kafka was alive Brod had often elicited manuscripts from his excessively scrupulous friend and was instrumental in the publication of some few of them. In Brod's words: "he knew with what fanatical veneration I listened to his every word. . . during the whole twenty-two years of our unclouded friendship, I never once threw away the smallest scrap of paper that came from him, no, not even a post card." In a conversation of 1921 he warned Kafka he would burn nothing. And so with good conscience the reverent executor issued to the world *The Trial* and *The Castle* -- both novels unfinished and somewhat problematical in their texts but nevertheless magnificently realized — and a host of lesser but still priceless fragments, painstakingly deciphered and edited. Kafka and Shakespeare have this in common: their reputations rest principally on texts they never approved or proofread.

This volume, then, holds as well many stories in various states of incompletion. Some, like "The Village Schoolmaster" and "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor," seem fatally truncated, their full intentions and final design destined to remain mysterious. In some others, notably "Investigations of a Dog," the author seems to have played out his inspiration without rounding out the story; Kafka's need to explore this conceit of philosophical speculation in a canine world where human beings are somehow unseen ("a sort of canine atheism" one commentator has called the phenomenon) has been happily exhausted before an end is reached. The failure is purely mechanical and we do not feel cheated, since the story's burden of private meaning has been unloaded — there are scarcely any pages in Kafka more sweetly and winningly autobiographical than these. In still other of these uncompleted stories, such as "The Great Wall of China" and "The Burrow," the end is even nearer, and we do not wish for any more. According to Dora Dymant, "The Burrow" had been concluded, in a version she destroyed, with a "scene describing the hero taking up a tense fighting position in expectation of the beast, and the decisive struggle in which the hero succumbs"; though there is poignance in this — "the beast" was Kafka's nickname for his disease, to which he was to succumb within a few months — we are glad to leave the burrowing hero, fussily timorous and blithely carnivorous, where he is, apprehensively poised amid menaces more cosmic and comic than anything his claws could grapple with. "The Burrow" and "The Great Wall of China" belong at the summit of Kafka's oeuvre; their fantastic images are developed with supreme elegance and resonance. The German titles of both contain the word *"Bau."* Kafka was obsessed with building, with work that is never done, that can never be done, that must always fall short of perfection. His manuscripts show Kafka to have been a fervent worker, "scribbling" (as he called his writing) with a stately steadiness across the page, revising rather little, but ceasing when authenticity no longer seemed to be present, often laying down parallel or even contradictory tracks in search of his prey, and content to leave his works in an "open" state like that of his Great Wall — their segments uncertainly linked, strange gaps left, the ultimate objective shied from as if too blindingly grand. Not to write for money or the coarser forms of glory is common enough among modern avant-gardists; but to abjure aesthetic "finish" itself carries asceticism a step farther, into a realm of protest where such disparate modernists as Eliot and Pound (in the

intrinsically fragmentary nature of their poetry) and Rilke and Salinger (in their capacities for silence) keep Kafka company. Incompletion is a quality of his work, a facet of its nobility. His briefest paragraphs and riddles sufficiently possess the adamancy of art.

Hearing Kafka read aloud from his youthful works "Description of a Struggle" and "Wedding Preparations in the Country" instantly convinced Max Brod that his friend was a genius: "I got the impression immediately that here was no ordinary talent speaking, but a genius." You who are picking up this volume in innocence of the author, however, might do well to skip these first two titles and return to them when initiated. Repeated readings of these grouped fragments have left them, for me, not merely opaque but repellent. "Description" was composed no later than 1904-5, when Kafka was in his early twenties. It is full of contortions both psychological ("I had to restrain myself from putting my arm around his shoulders and kissing him on the eyes as a reward for having absolutely no use for me") and physical ("this thought. . . tormented me so much that while walking I bent my back until my hands reached my knees"; "I screwed up my mouth. . . and supported myself by standing on my right leg while resting the left one on its toes"). There is something of adolescent posturing here, or of those rigid bodily states attendent upon epilepsy and demonic possession. The conversation seems hectic, and the hero and his companions pass a mysterious leg injury back and forth like the ancient Graeae sharing one eye. Self-loathing and self-distrust lurk within all this somatic unease; the "supplicant" prays in church at the top of his voice "in order to be looked at and acquire a body." A certain erotic undercurrent is present also, and in "Wedding Preparations" the hero, Eduard Raban, is proceeding toward his wedding in the country. This narrative at least boasts a discernible direction; but we strongly feel that Raban, for all his dutiful determination, will never get there. The typical Kafkaesque process of non-arrival is underway. And in truth Kafka, though heterosexual, charming, and several times engaged, and furthermore professing that "Marrying, founding a family, accepting all the children that come [is] the utmost a human being can succeed in doing at all," never did manage to get married.

The charm that these disquieting, abortive early pieces exerted upon Brod and other auditors (for Kafka used to read his work aloud to friends, sometimes laughing so hard he could not continue reading) must have