



# The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head: Franz Kafka: A Biographical Essay

By Louis Begley

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## The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head: Franz Kafka: A Biographical Essay By Louis Begley

**A new biography of Western literature's most iconic writer, from the acclaimed novelist and author of *About Schmidt*.**

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's 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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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Although numerous biographers have guided readers on a journey through Kafka's labyrinthine life and writings, celebrated novelist Begley (*About Schmidt*) cannily allows Kafka to speak in his own words as much as possible, weaving selections from letters, journals, novels and stories into a biographical narrative. Kafka's father wanted a law career for his son, but Kafka's will to write was so strong that he felt a constant trembling on [his] forehead. His period of greatest creativity came between 1912 and 1917, when he wrote, among others, *The Metamorphosis* and most of *The Trial*. Begley points out that many misread Kafka by making him synonymous with his characters. There has also, Begley writes, been an intense feeding frenzy of exegetes and other types of Kafka scholars circling around *The Trial*... one can almost hear scholastic dentures going clack-clack, subjecting the works to critical theories of every stripe. Begley's book emphasizes the importance of valuing the aesthetic and emotional impact of Kafka's work, offering a fresh glimpse of the tortured genius behind some of the 20th century's most perplexing and most rewarding writings. Photos. (June)

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From [Booklist](#)

Kafka may be the most influential twentieth-century fiction writer; his realistic fantasies of urban angst anticipated, so it seems, the predicament of the modern-to-postmodern citizen as an unworthy, petty, guilty, disposable cog in an inscrutable machine. In four long chapters on Kafka's family and employment, his Jewishness, his love life, and his final illness, novelist Begley (*About Schmidt*, 1996) discloses how much Kafka's protagonists owe to their creator's character as a self-made man's neurasthenic, diffident son; an irreligious Jew sentimental about the holiness of simple shtetl dwellers; an exasperatingly ambivalent suitor; and a stoical sufferer of a rapidly progressing, fatal disease. Yet those protagonists weren't autobiographical, says the closing chapter on the major works, while it persuades us that they are so much alike that one shouldn't feel guilty for reading only, say, *The Trial* and "The Metamorphosis," and calling it quits with Kafka. Even in so economical a sketch of his life as Begley's, Kafka tries one's patience, and alas, Begley merely asserts rather than argues what a fine writer of German Kafka was. --Ray Olson

About the Author

**Louis Begley**'s first novel, *Wartime Lies*, won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Prix Médicis, and the *Irish Times*-Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize. Since then, he has published seven novels, including *About Schmidt*, made into a movie starring Jack Nicholson and Kathy Bates. His most recent publication is *Matters of Honor*. He lives in New York City.

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