METAMORPHOSES

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In Search of Franz Kafka

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Profile Books

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Sabon by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80081 274 1
eISBN 978 1 80081 276 5

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PROLOGUE

What Makes Kafka Kafka

Franz Kafka's life is both very easy and very difficult to summarise. Easy because it was short – he was born in 1883 and died in 1924, and so lived forty years, give or take; spent mostly in one place – central Prague; and one job – in the field of insurance law. His health was poor; he never married or started a family; did not travel much, and never outside of Europe; did not go to war. But then in other ways Kafka's life cannot be recapitulated so easily. Our commonplace ideas about national, ethnic, religious and linguistic identity, for example, cannot do justice to him, which is why he seems to be called something different in every biographical blurb you might come across – German, Austrian, Czech, Jewish and various combinations of the above. Despite his bachelordom, largely spent in Prague, he managed to develop significant relationships with four women from four different cities in four different countries. He also often fantasised about travelling or even moving permanently, and was keen on learning about other places and cultures, which gave his life a much broader intellectual horizon than might appear at first glance.

Besides, however mundane many of his life's events might have been, Kafka kept track of them in numerous notebooks,

diaries and letters, of which many thousands of pages have survived. A record of conflicts with his family, especially with his father; of friendships; of books he read, plays he went to, languages he learnt, dreams he had, food he ate; his ailments, fears, anxieties, hopes, the things he enjoyed; the things he said or did to other people, both kind and unkind. This, combined with the almost unimaginable wealth of scholarship that has investigated, and continues to investigate, virtually every facet of his life, from distant cousins to sexual escapades, and from digestive issues to the brand of hairbrush he used, gives us an uncommonly comprehensive insight into the life of this man who died one hundred years ago.

Such is the depth and breadth of our collective obsession with this Kafka, however, that we do not often stop to think *why* it is that we are so interested in him. The answer might seem obvious. In his notebooks, scattered in between entries about what his boss said at work and where he went for an evening walk, Kafka wrote down numerous stories and literary fragments, including three unfinished novels. *The Metamorphosis*, *The Judgement*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*: these are among the most famous, the most recognisable works of Kafka, but also of the twentieth century, of the German literary canon – perhaps of the whole of world literature, across history. Some of these works were published in his lifetime; most were not. Some of the relatively few early readers who encountered his works as he was writing them – the vast majority in the ten years between 1912 and 1922, when he was in his thirties – were deeply impressed. Chief among them was his best friend and later first editor Max Brod, from early on possessed of an unshakeable belief in Franz Kafka's literary genius.

It might seem obvious, then, where our obsession with Kafka's life stems from, what animates his countless biographies. We want to know what made Kafka Kafka. But while the cultural environment, historical context and personal experiences that shaped his life did influence Kafka's writing in myriad ways – as we shall see in the pages that follow – there is also another part to this story, a part that does not get told nearly as often. To understand how Kafka became Kafka, we cannot stop in 1924, the year of his death, where most biographies end. To gain the status he eventually gained, Kafka needed readers. Readers who would share Brod's belief in his extraordinary gifts. Almost all these readers only got their hands on his books after his death, many in translation. How did it happen? Who were some of those readers and how did they impact his literary fame? Why have Kafka's writings resonated with so many people, in so many places, at so many points in time? Why do we keep reading him today? And what might we learn about literature, and about ourselves, the species that cares so much about it, by telling Kafka's story in this way – through the stories of his readers around the world, over the past century?

To answer these questions, I travelled across time and space in the footsteps of dozens of Kafka's readers: from a British aristocrat-turned-scholar poring over Kafka's writings in the bowels of a Swiss bank vault to ordinary readers from all corners of the globe leaving notes at Kafka's grave in Prague, and from a war veteran in Berlin who survived life in the trenches but feels defeated by the newly published, enigmatic tale of *The Metamorphosis* to a hip Korean writer transforming the Kafkaesque into a Man Booker International Prize-winning feminist manifesto a century later.

In the process, I approached my guiding question – what made Kafka Kafka? – from many different angles. For one thing, it has certainly helped that he was a well-educated European man who wrote in German, a language with many speakers and much cultural prestige. All this meant that, despite the very real prejudices he faced as a Jewish person, his books still had a relative advantage in reaching a wide readership: he was able to access publication venues, translation networks and cultural circles with an international reach that popularised his works, both before and after his death. Many examples of such 'technologies of recognition', to use literary theorist Shu-mei Shih's term, were at work during Kafka's life and afterlife, and are discussed in the chapters to come.

But many other well-educated, European, German-speaking men produced copious amounts of writing over the centuries too and yet never achieved the kind of global recognition that Kafka did. Some of this was due to sheer serendipity. In Chapters One and Two, I recount the story of Kafka's various manuscripts: some were burnt, lost or confiscated; others *nearly* burnt, lost or confiscated. The fate of those papers was often down to the decisions and actions of individuals. Other kinds of serendipity were at play too. The name 'Kafka', with its brevity, pleasing symmetry and ease of pronunciation in many languages, not to mention a rather attractive meaning in Czech, turned out to be an unexpected marketing boon at various points in Kafka's lifetime and beyond, as we shall see in Chapters Three and Five. His name has even given rise to a popular adjective, used everywhere from back-cover blurbs of innumerable literary fiction books to the pages of the *Daily Mail*, examples of

which are discussed in Chapter Four and sprinkled throughout the book.

But what about the intrinsic aesthetic value of his works, you might ask at this point? It was important, of course – but perhaps not exactly in the way one might expect. As we shall see, many of Kafka's early readers, even highly skilled literary critics and well-educated German-speaking Jews who shared much of Kafka's background, were puzzled by his works. Some found them difficult and frustrating; others compared them to books by contemporary authors, many of whom are today almost entirely forgotten. Given this context, it would be difficult to claim that Kafka's works heralded the arrival of an absolutely novel, objectively unique and universally compelling literary quality. And yet over time, as the literature of the early twentieth century – the literature of modernity – became history, Kafka was elevated to the status of one of its patron saints, alongside the likes of Joyce, Proust and Woolf. I address Kafka's status as a modernist icon and show in detail the workings of his literary technique at various points in this book.

But to proclaim the aesthetic value of a piece of writing is a strangely unsatisfactory, theoretical exercise. To experience it in practice is not only infinitely more enjoyable – it is also the foundation of any compelling theory. That is why throughout this book I do not just explain what Kafka's writings are about and what they are like, but also show what they have meant to various readers, often very different than me. For once the more tangible factors – Kafka's social position; the happy accidents that helped his works along; the mechanisms by which literary canons are formed; the distinctive characteristics of his writing – are explained

and accounted for, there is still something left to explore. A reader and a book: the alchemy of an encounter. *Metamorphoses: In Search of Franz Kafka* is ultimately about why Kafka matters – and, more broadly, what literature does to us, and for us.

Kafka himself was well aware of this mysterious power that books and writers can wield over their readers. Throughout his life, he had a knack for startling, pithy, aphoristic pronouncements, even if they had to be painfully coaxed out of the agony of writer's block. Brod would later claim that Kafka never wrote a 'single line', not a 'single word', not even when briefly jotting down a casual little note for a friend, that was not 'infused with a special magic charm'. This is clearly an exaggeration – but plenty of such one-liners can be found, also on the topic of reading. In 1903, twenty-year-old Kafka writes to a friend: 'Some books seem like a key to unfamiliar rooms in one's own castle.' He was reading the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart at the time. A year later: 'A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.' This time he was engrossed in the diaries of Friedrich Hebbel, a nineteenth-century dramatist. And then in 1915, Kafka writes in his diary of the Swedish playwright August Strindberg: 'I'm not reading him to read him, but to lie on his chest.'

Whether knowingly or not, over the years many a reader has taken a cue from the man himself and developed attachments to Kafka's writing of the kind that he imagined in some of his own most precious moments as a reader. Kafka's books have acted as a point of access for the exploration of the hidden corners of many readers' sense of self – 'a key to unfamiliar rooms in one's own castle'; as a tool for

a startling, violent rupture in their unthinking or unfeeling existence – 'the axe for the frozen sea inside us'; and as an intimate, nurturing embrace – the breast at which to lie. Let us meet some of those readers now, and let them guide our exploration of Kafka's work, life and afterlife.

1

Oxford

English Kafka

Migrations

The other night I was having dinner with colleagues and ended up talking to a visiting professor of medieval history from the United States. She asked what I was working on. A book on Franz Kafka, I said. She knew who he was: a fantastically influential writer, a German-speaking Jew who had lived in largely Czech-speaking Prague one hundred years ago, the author of modernist classics like *The Trial*, *The Castle* and *The Metamorphosis*, often described as atmospheric, enigmatic books about inscrutable bureaucrats, mysterious courts and entrapped protagonists with names like 'Josef K.' or just 'K.'.

I am trying to get closer to understanding Kafka through the stories of his readers, I explained to my dinner companion. How fascinating, she answered; she had taken a class on Kafka in college and loved his writing. There was one thing I should make sure to explain in my book, though, she immediately added, namely how *funny* Kafka is: people take him too seriously, she thought. They miss the satirical, dark, self-deprecating humour of Central European Jews at

the turn of the twentieth century. She could see it because she was brought up with it: both of her parents' families were Central European Jews who had fled Nazi persecution to the United States. In fact, she added somewhat diffidently, did I know that she was herself distantly related to Kafka? Her great-grandmother's sister-in-law was Kafka's second cousin – close enough to have gone to his funeral, almost exactly a century ago.

There I was, eating mushroom risotto in the dining room of an Oxford college next to a woman whose relatives had been to Kafka's funeral one hundred years ago. Rarely had I felt closer to him – and to the mysterious workings of cultural affinity. Books have the power to stir us and to connect us in unexpected ways. For my dinner companion, Kafka's works captured and preserved the oblique humour central to how she thought about her own family – its history and survival in the face of the great catastrophes of the twentieth century. For me, Kafka was quickly becoming a strange obsession.

At first, it seemed like a perfectly ordinary interest for a scholar of German literature. Kafka was one of the most famous German-language writers of all time, if not *the* most famous, after all. And yet my connection to him felt special. I was not Jewish but, had I been born in his times, Kafka and I would have been compatriots. Like Prague, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century my hometown of Cracow lay on the northern edge of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I was born more than one hundred years after him, long after the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire – and yet we still ended up as neighbours: I now live and work in Oxford, right next to the Bodleian Library, which houses

most of Kafka's surviving manuscripts. In post-Brexit Britain, with all the talk of making Britain great again, hostility against immigrants and non-dominant ethnicities and religious groups, and the government de-prioritising the teaching of foreign languages and cultures in schools and at universities, it is hard to shake the feeling that neither of us makes too much sense here.

This book is my attempt to shake this feeling once and for all, by showing how we can write cultural history in a way that includes rather than excludes, how we can put interactions and overlaps between cultures front and centre rather than painting a picture of separate and disjointed national trajectories, and how we can pay attention to the ways in which books from faraway times and places come alive in the hands of individual readers. The way we think about the history of literature changes if we start thinking of books and their authors as belonging to readers rather than nations – beyond the boundaries of space, time and language.

For one thing, it gives me licence not to begin this book by telling you about Kafka's birth in the summer of 1883 in Prague. I will eventually get to Prague in a later chapter, but first let me explain why I do not think we can – or should – jump straight into Kafka's life. In the model of literary history that I want to share, which scholars sometimes refer to as the study of reception, reading is always a relationship between a book and its reader. The reader must first reflect on her own position and identity because otherwise her unexamined assumptions and previous experiences – of both life and literature – can cloud her relationship with the book. But this does not mean that the reader's identity is an

obstacle to her engagement with the book. As we will see time and time again, and as we have already seen with my dinner companion, a serious appraisal of where readers are coming from – both literally and figuratively – can help us see with much more clarity why and how books matter.

I begin as I must – right where I am, with a neat row of Kafka's books stretching out on the shelf behind me: my study in Oxford, ten years almost to the day after I first arrived here from Cracow, a Polish city some 250 miles to the east of Prague.

With all the eagerness of a newly minted student and immigrant, I quickly filled up my calendar with the academic events on offer that October. The largest one was held at the Sheldonian Theatre, where I had just matriculated as a first-year student of German literature. Oxford was celebrating the joint purchase – with the German Literature Archive in Marbach – of a collection of letters and postcards that Franz had written to his favourite sister, Ottilie, known as Ottla. A specialist lecture and a reading from *Kafka's Dick*, Alan Bennett's irreverent play in which Kafka pays a visit to a Yorkshire couple, accompanied an exhibition of the newly acquired letters. Other Kafka manuscripts owned by the Bodleian Library were on display too: two of his three novels, *The Man who Disappeared* (also known as *America*) and *The Castle*, as well as *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka's most famous story, which was one of my set texts that year.

As I walked under the Bridge of Sighs on a crisp autumn morning, my own copy of *The Metamorphosis* in hand, on my way to steal a peek at those treasured manuscripts through a glass case in one of the largest and oldest libraries in the world, I had many questions. How had I, a Polish

teenager with a love for books and foreign languages, but without any connections in England, ended up here? And more importantly: how did the manuscripts of some of the most famous books of the twentieth century, penned by Kafka in German, in Prague, not far from where I came from, and also bearing no obvious connection to England, end up here? In other words: why did Oxford have so many of Kafka's manuscripts? And why exactly did people expend so much attention – and money – on old pieces of paper, when anybody who actually wanted to read the thing could buy a perfectly usable modern edition? This reverence for old objects that had once belonged to somebody important smacked of the devotion with which believers approached religious relics and, since I had just revolted against the Catholic Church, this was bound to rub me up the wrong way.

What was already clear at the time, though, was that Kafka's writing was indeed very special, unlike anything I had ever read before. Its magnetic force, its mysterious hold over so many readers, was apparent as I took in the large audience gathered at the Sheldonian. Generations of scholars and critics had pored over the question of what makes Kafka unique, and yet – as with all great writers – they did not seem to have exhausted it. It has taken me some time, but now – a decade later, and after many hours of puzzling over Kafka's dreamlike texts under Oxford's dreaming spires – I am ready to circle back to this question, and to that special day in the Sheldonian.

Locked Out of the Library

Over the years I have found that the best way to understand a writer is to understand his readers. As the centenary of Kafka's death in 1924 draws nearer, readers all over the world will reach for his books again, or for the first time. I want to meet them – and not just academics. I want to find books, films and plays in various languages that rewrite Kafka for the twenty-first century, just as Alan Bennett did with *Kafka's Dick* in the 1980s. I want to listen in as book clubs discuss his texts, to read reviews on personal blogs, visit museums that tell Kafka's story a century after his death and read notes left at his grave in Prague by his readers.

I concoct this plan at the beginning of 2020. But we all know what comes next: the global Covid-19 pandemic. For more than a year, I will not leave Oxford at all. I am here, in the very spot where I first found myself thinking about Kafka's writings. But, in a rather Kafkaesque turn of events, when I decide that it is time for me to go to the Bodleian to examine Kafka's fabled manuscripts up close for the first time in my decade at Oxford, we enter a national lockdown. The library gates shut. I am not allowed to enter.

Fortunately, I do not live in one of Kafka's nightmarish tales, and 2020 soon teaches us that we can find new ways of accessing things that seem inaccessible. At the end of March, the Bodleian hosts a webinar about museum conservation and Kafka's manuscripts. I sign up and soon am sitting in front of my laptop, just one individual in an audience of a few hundred, looking at high-resolution photos of Kafka's manuscripts, and listening to Fiona McLees, the conservator who has been working on these 'celebrity items', as she calls them, for the past few years. We find out

that only two or three people a year are granted access to the manuscripts, and that in fact the library does not receive many more requests to see them. Regardless, the curators lavish loving care on the manuscripts in an effort to preserve the frail paper of the inconspicuous octavo and quarto notebooks that Kafka often used for his writing, and other bundles of handwritten pages.

As I listen to McLees, I am struck by one point in particular: she does not know German, so cannot read the manuscripts herself, and yet her working life is devoted to ensuring that these papers survive. How oddly appropriate for a writer seen by many as the symbol of literary inscrutability, the writer of enigmas: the one person whose job it is to look at his manuscripts literally cannot read them.

In her talk, McLees quotes extensively from a paper by Philip Larkin, here in his capacity as a librarian rather than poet. One of Larkin's terms that McLees is particularly interested in is the 'magical value' of a manuscript. 'All literary manuscripts have two kinds of value: what might be called the magical value and the meaningful value', Larkin said in a paper given to the Manuscripts Group of the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries in 1979. 'The magical value is the older and more universal: this is the paper [the writer] wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination.'

As McLees puts it, 'Handling the manuscripts so intimately gives you a – perhaps imagined – sense of the person who produced them.' It seems to bring us closer to the mystery of literary creation. I was not so far off after all when I thought, seeing the Kafka manuscripts for the first

time, that they were being displayed like religious relics. It has long been argued that in the twentieth century art became a form of secular religion. Readers may value manuscripts the same way Catholics value relics of saints. In fact, McLees herself does not shy away from using the language of religion when talking about the manuscripts. She describes a broken sewing thread in one of Kafka's notebooks as a 'precious relic' and, though she concedes that this may sound 'absurd', later on she talks again of 'relics', 'worship' and 'hallowed objects'.

Andrew Motion glossed Larkin's theory of value by speaking of a 'primitive, visceral thrill' one feels when confronted with a manuscript produced by a famous author. But Larkin – and McLees – did not stop there. Another kind of value is involved here too: the 'meaningful value', which is 'of much more recent origin, and is the degree to which a manuscript helps to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of a writer's life and work', writes Larkin. 'A manuscript can show the cancellations, the substitutions, the shifting towards the ultimate form and the final meaning. A notebook, simply by being a fixed sequence of pages, can supply evidence of chronology. Unpublished work, unfinished work, even notes towards unwritten work all contribute to our knowledge of a writer's intentions; his letters and diaries add to what we know of his life and the circumstances in which he wrote.' Kafka is a case in point, as Malcolm Pasley, the lead editor of the first critical edition of his writings based on an extensive study of the manuscripts, memorably demonstrated.

Kafka's Manuscripts

Kafka's most famous novel, *The Trial*, tells the cryptic story of Josef K., a man arrested and prosecuted by an enigmatic court for a crime whose nature is never made clear to the reader – or, it would seem, even to Josef K. himself. For Umberto Eco, *The Trial* was a paradigmatic example of an 'open' work of literature – one that needs to be constructed by its readers as much as by its author. Malcolm Pasley is an extreme case of such an active reader, a reader who through his editorial work would go on to influence countless future readers. In 'Kafka's *Der Process*: What the Manuscript Can Tell Us', a lecture delivered in Oxford in 1990, he recounted his intimate study of the manuscript of *The Trial* in the late 1980s, when it was still kept in 'the ill-lit bowels of a Zurich bank', where he had to work 'under the eye of its owner' – Esther Hoffe, a woman who had found herself in the possession of Kafka's papers as a result of a process nearly as arcane as *Der Process* itself. Unlike in English, the German word that is the title of the novel means both 'trial' and 'process'. It is one of the great revelations that undergraduates have when they study the novel in the original: it opens up a whole host of new interpretative paths, suggesting as it does that this is not just a tale of a trial, but also of the process of writing itself, of telling tales.

Pasley did much to flesh out this idea. By examining the individual pages of the manuscript up close, not unlike an investigator hired by an unknown court, he was able to reconstruct an astonishing amount of information about Kafka's notoriously complicated writing process. Kafka had never finished work on *The Trial*, let alone published the novel; all he left behind were 'some 160 loose leaves' (Pasley

counted them) that had not been arranged into a fixed order. Some of them formed longer, coherent chapters; some were just the opening lines of unfinished longer sections. Would editors of Kafka's work – or even individual readers – have to decide themselves what order to put them in? In the 1990s, a small German-Swiss publishing house produced an unconventional edition of the novel: sixteen chapters in loose bundles placed in a slipcase, to be arranged and rearranged by the reader herself.

But what interested Pasley was the fact that Kafka had originally written *The Trial* in a series of notebooks, and only later took them apart. 'Why did he do this? Puzzle No. 1', writes Pasley. Poring over the loose sheets, he noticed that almost all of them had been watermarked, and – more importantly – that 'the position of the watermark pattern had varied from quire to quire and from book to book'. This discovery, and a series of cross-comparisons with other manuscripts kept at Oxford, allowed Pasley to ascertain that various sections of *The Trial* had been written down in notebooks containing other drafts. Kafka needed to take them apart so he could gather all the bits of his novel in one place. Puzzle No. 1 – solved.

But then there was Puzzle No. 2: in what order did Kafka write the different sections of *The Trial*, scattered across those various notebooks? To answer this question, Pasley decided to examine another feature of the manuscript absent from printed editions: the size of Kafka's handwriting, which 'underwent a most remarkable change during the five months or so when he was engaged on *Der Process*'. More counting was required.

Pasley established that in the two years before Kafka

started work on *The Trial*, he would write about 200 words on average on each page of his standard-sized notebooks. But in the seven years after he abandoned the draft, he would write some 350 words on a page of the same size. A comparison with other, more easily datable drafts from the decade in question confirmed that 'the contraction of the script had proceeded progressively in a linear fashion'. After a 'rather painful excursion into mathematics', as he put it, Pasley concluded that Kafka wrote most of the manuscript in the first two months of work on the draft – and then got stuck.

'It was evidently not just Josef K.'s *Process* that was going badly: Franz Kafka's "*Process*"' – his writing process – 'had run into serious trouble as well', says Pasley. But Kafka, used to tormenting himself over unfinished drafts, seems to have anticipated such a turn of events. He decided to start by writing the opening *and* closing sequences of the novel – Josef K.'s arrest and death – first. This was the most significant discovery that Pasley made: by analysing the watermarked paper and the number of words per page, he was able to prove that those two passages were written one straight after the other.

And so, Pasley writes, 'the *process* in which Josef K. is involved, and the process of its invention and inscription, seem to hang mysteriously together'. He goes on to quote from the closing passage of the novel, where Josef K. asks himself: 'Shall they say of me that at the beginning of my trial I wanted to end it, and now, at its end, I want to begin it again?' But in the original German, as Pasley's meticulous research demonstrated, this sentence describes Kafka's writing process too. He wrote the ending of the novel when

he was just beginning to work on it – and once the ending had been committed to paper, it was time to go back to the beginning of the plot. Such are the delightful discoveries that manuscripts can yield: a perfect example of their meaningful value.

Precious Like Papyrus

In the webinar on Kafka's manuscripts, Fiona McLees goes on to add a third kind of value to Larkin's scheme: material value. This one might be hard to swallow for readers who like to think of Kafka's works as pure, transcendent art, the value of which cannot be measured in money. But the fact is that his manuscripts – even postcards or handwritten short notes – bring in huge sums at auctions. In 1988 the German Literature Archive in Marbach reportedly paid nearly $2 million for the manuscript of *The Trial*, a sum identified by *The New York Times* as 'the highest price ever paid for a modern manuscript' at the time. A mercantile metaphor slips into McLees's talk: she repeatedly speaks of 'stakeholders' when talking about the people who are invested in the manuscripts, even as she apologises for the term each time.

But perhaps this is to be expected: we regularly talk of value in these terms – I just talked of people *invested* in the manuscripts myself – and so did Kafka. For example, the German word for guilt – 'Schuld' – also means debt, including in the literal, monetary sense. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa thinks with trepidation of his father's 'Schuld' which he tries to help pay off by working overtime; the immediate context suggests that a monetary debt is at stake but, in the context of the story as a whole, it is fair

to say that a sense of ill-defined, metaphysical guilt affects Gregor and his fraught relationship with his family, too.

At the same time, Kafka did not treat his manuscripts as objects of material value, but rather as working drafts, as McLees makes clear. She likes the way Kafka's biographer Reiner Stach put it: 'No author at the beginning of the twentieth century – least of all Kafka himself – could have imagined that his written legacy would soon be measured, photographed, and described as though it were a set of papyrus rolls from an Egyptian burial chamber.' In fact, he did not seem to think they should survive at all.

Kafka famously asked his closest friend, Max Brod, to burn his manuscripts after his death, but Brod disregarded that request and posthumously published Kafka's writings. But the truth might be more complicated than that. Kafka knew that Brod was his greatest champion, always enthusiastic about his writing, always trying to persuade him to publish more, arranging for publication of this or that story here and there, holding on to every scrap of writing that Kafka would give him. And this was despite Brod being a writer himself, in fact, much better known and more successful than Kafka at the time, underscoring his selfless dedication to Kafka's legacy. After Kafka's death, Brod claimed that Kafka must have realised that he could never bring himself to burn the manuscripts: in asking him of all people to carry out his supposed wish, Kafka in fact ensured their survival. Brod eventually went down in history primarily as Kafka's most important reader, rather than a writer in his own right.

He held on to his friend's manuscripts even as he was hurriedly leaving Prague for Palestine on the last train before

the Nazis closed the Czech border in 1939. The next eighty years would see various wads of these precious papers move back and forth between Israel, Germany, Switzerland – and England. The history of the manuscripts 'could be the subject of a full-length adventure novel or movie', writes Germanist Osman Durrani. As I listen to McLees, I think about the curious chapter of that history which brought the most substantial portion of the manuscripts to Oxford.

In 1960, a young British aristocrat, born in India during the British Raj, now a fellow in German at Magdalen College, found out from one of his undergraduates that Kafka's grandnephew was studying law at another Oxford college. The Germanist in question was none other than Malcolm Pasley, soon to be the world's most famous scholar and editor of Kafka's manuscripts. More discoveries followed: the student's mother, Marianne Steiner, lived in London, and she and Kafka's few other surviving relatives were the legal owners of most of Kafka's manuscripts, even though it was Brod who had held them in his possession for many years. In fact, he had moved most of them to a Swiss bank vault a few years earlier, fearing for their safety in Israel during the Suez Crisis. Kafka's heirs now agreed to Pasley's suggestion that the manuscripts be moved from Zurich to Oxford and deposited in the Bodleian Library. More papers soon followed from other sources. Since then, some have passed into the library's possession, and others are owned jointly by the Bodleian and the children of one of Kafka's sisters.

In 1961, the core manuscripts arrived. But how exactly? As Pasley would soon write in the first article that listed all of these papers for other interested scholars to see,

'the somewhat unexpected arrival in this country of these remarkable documents' was preceded by 'a series of not inappropriate vicissitudes and wanderings'. He did not specify his own role in these, which did not stop at talking to Kafka's heirs. Pasley brought the manuscripts to Oxford himself, in his own car. As Jim Reed, one of his colleagues at Oxford, would later reminisce, 'his journey has become a legend among scholars of German'.

While on a skiing trip in the Alps, Pasley got word that the last bureaucratic obstacles had been cleared and the manuscripts were ready for collection in Zurich. He packed up his skis, bought an extra suitcase, walked into the bank ('the wintry arrival and the confrontation with officials had atmospheric echoes of Kafka's *Castle* and *Trial*', Reed commented), took out insurance at a travel agency down the street, got into his small Fiat (given that one of the manuscripts he was to transport was *The Metamorphosis* it seems a missed opportunity that it was not a Volkswagen Beetle, as Reed pointed out), and drove off.

Kevin Hilliard, another of Pasley's Oxford colleagues, wondered at how 'this model gentleman understood the mind of one of the most idiosyncratic and radical writers of the twentieth century better than anyone else in his time'. The same question hangs over an article about Pasley titled 'Kafka's Half-Brother', written by a reporter from the German weekly *Die Zeit* who visited Pasley in his north Oxford home in 1992. By then, Pasley had become a fellow of the British Academy and inherited his father's baronetcy. That is the mystery of cultural affinity: through reading, we can imaginatively inhabit worlds very different from our own. By tracing the history of extraordinary investments

– both actual and metaphoric – in Kafka's manuscripts that his readers have made over the last century across borders of language, nationality, history and class, we can begin to appreciate just how inadequate traditional literary histories are when they refuse to follow texts as they cross these lines.

We can also start to see more clearly that the meaning of books can often be found in the reasons why readers find them personally significant. I matriculated at Magdalen College exactly half a century after the manuscripts' arrival in Oxford, although I did not realise it at the time. I never met Pasley: he retired from teaching in 1986 and died in 2004, after years of suffering from multiple sclerosis. Yet I feel his presence, editorial at least, every time I flick open my edition of *The Trial* or *The Metamorphosis*; Pasley led the editorial team that produced the standard critical edition of Kafka's works. But while I have much admiration for these two classics, I have always felt especially drawn to Kafka's least-known novel, *The Man who Disappeared*, the enigmatic story of Karl, a teenage immigrant from Eastern Europe who travels to America on his own, where he has to find his way around this new country. In Kafka's world, there is space for all sorts of different characters – and readers.

Pandemic Read

As the coronavirus pandemic rages around the world, one text in particular seems to come into its own: *Die Verwandlung* or, as it is known in the English-speaking world, *The Metamorphosis*. Perhaps it is purely because the story of Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman who 'woke one morning from troubled dreams' only to find himself 'transformed