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Is That Kafka?: 99 Finds



Synopsis

Out of the massive research for an authoritative 1,500-page biography emerges this wunderkammer of 99 delightfully odd facts about Kafka. In the course of compiling his highly acclaimed three-volume biography of Kafka, while foraging to libraries and archives from Prague to Israel, Reiner Stach made one astounding discovery after another: unexpected photographs, inconsistencies in handwritten texts, excerpts from letters, and testimonies from Kafka's contemporaries that shed surprising light on his personality and his writing. *Is that Kafka?* presents the crystal granules of the real Kafka: he couldn't lie, but he tried to cheat on his high-school exams; bitten by the fitness fad, he avidly followed the regime of a Danish exercise guru; he drew beautifully; he loved beer; he read biographies voraciously; he made the most beautiful presents, especially for children; odd things made him cry or made him furious; he adored slapstick. Every discovery by Stach turns on its head the stereotypical version of the tortured neurotic—and as each one chips away at the monolithic dark Kafka, the keynote, of all things, becomes laughter. For *Is that Kafka?* Stach has assembled 99 of his most exciting discoveries, culling the choicest, most entertaining bits, and adding his knowledgeable commentaries. Illustrated with dozens of previously unknown images, this volume is a singular literary pleasure.

Book Information

Hardcover: 352 pages

Publisher: New Directions; 1 edition (March 21, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0811221237

ISBN-13: 978-0811221238

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 1.2 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (4 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #348,823 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #32 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Movements & Periods > Modern](#) #122 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > European > German](#) #236 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Literature > World Literature > European](#)

Customer Reviews

Reiner Stach has written a three-volume literary biography of Franz Kafka, which I understand is now the leading Kafka biography. In the course of his research into Kafka's life, Stach assembled

many tidbits that, as he writes, "display him in unexpected lights [and] allow us to hear rarely detected undertones and overtones." Stach presents these 99 tidbits as "Finds". Taken together, they humanize Kafka and demonstrate (in the words of his friend Georg Langer) that he was "an absolutely original person" and an "exceptional personality". The 99 Finds are an eclectic collection. They are presented in short pieces or vignettes, ranging from one to five pages. Many contain historical photographs or facsimiles of Kafka's handwriting or sketches. Most are based on an extract from Kafka's letters, diaries, or writings, or from the letters or memoirs of others. And for most, Stach provides brief explanation and context. Perhaps a few examples will be helpful. Find #9 is entitled "Kafka Drinks Beer". It contains about a dozen excerpts from letters and diaries relating to Kafka drinking beer and how, in the final weeks of his life, he became a "passionate drinker". Stach explains that in those last weeks, "because of his laryngeal tuberculosis, Kafka could only take tiny, painful swallows, and so he suffered from constant thirst." Relevant to Kafka's tuberculosis, another Find (#27) contains about a dozen excerpts relating to Kafka's somewhat skeptical but tolerant attitude towards the doctors who long labored to restore him to relative health. One Find deals with Kafka's occasional visits to brothels. It includes a touching photograph of Kafka and a wine bar waitress ("one of his unfortunate flings").

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