

“Global Kafka”



Barnard College, Comparative Literature and Translation Studies Program
Spring Semester 2021

CPLT 3143 “Topics in Comp Lit: Global Kafka”

Instructor: Prof. E. Grimm
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This new course introduces Barnard and Columbia students to the works of Prague-born writer Franz Kafka by focusing on issues which seem highly relevant in the new millennium: his vision of foreign cultures; his perception of modern bureaucracy; his views of social isolation; his experience of untenable relationships—all of these views and concerns are as important today as they were when Kafka started his career in the early 20th century.

As a canonical figure--whose works are now widely recognized as key examples of modernism--Kafka will serve as a springboard for exploring his international legacy and his influence in much broader terms—how do contemporary writers respond to his texts? Why is it that several stars of American literature or major representatives of world literature have rediscovered Kafka’s prose

in recent years? Which aspects of his writing may sound antiquated to our ears and what kind of stories still appeal to contemporary audiences?

We will try to answer such questions by taking a closer look at Kafka's visions of the African desert, ancient Chinese empires, and modern "Amerika;" we will study novels (or parts thereof) such as *The Trial*, *The Castle* and *Amerika* with an eye for the narrator's construction of labyrinths and vast spaces where the lives of males and females, humans and things, Caucasians and non-Caucasians, etc. intersect. Some of the stories resemble nightmares and some seem to correspond quite closely with Kafka's personal records or letters to close friends. At the beginning of the semester, we will examine this relationship between dream and fiction before exploring the writer's strange fondness for "uncanny" spaces which seem to be created for disorientation. In our semester-long examination we will come across an astounding number of non-human agents; we will try to find answers to the question of why monkeys, horses, mice or dogs play such an important role in this writer's imagination. His remarkable interest in creaturely life has turned Kafka into a splendid reference point for critics and scholars who seek to understand our interaction with animals from an ethical and literary perspective. Lastly, this course will provide you with the analytical tools for interpreting a number of highly characteristic features; several meetings are dedicated to an in-depth analysis of the stories' formal features; we will move back and forth between translation and interpretation of words, sentences, names and titles. A large part of our readings is based on recent re-translations which signal an intense debate and tough competition among the new translators who have emerged in the last two decades. All works are read in translation but feel free to study the texts in the original if you are familiar with the language.

Quick orientation:

**A. READING KAFKA IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT:
TRANSLATION, INTERPRETATION,
PLEASURE AND ANXIETY**

PART ONE: Kafka's nightmares -- the commentator's joy and worries

B. UNCANNY HOMES AND STRANGE FIGURES

PART TWO: Typically Kafka? Fictional Spaces

PART THREE: Kafka's characters: unique and quite ordinary (pedestrian and artist)

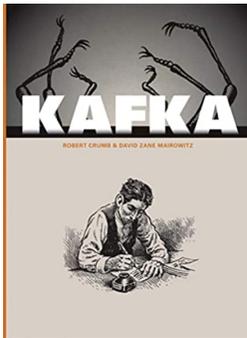
PART FOUR: Strange Creatures

C. TRAVELING AROUND THE GLOBE

PART FIVE: Journeys to the South, East, and West:
Arabia, China and America

PART SIX: The “K-effect:” Kafka abroad

Main features:



Readings: short stories and very short stories
major novels (brief excerpts) such as *The trial*; *The Castler*;
America

Introduction to core issues: postcolonial, feminist, formalist, philosophical perspectives
&
translator's views and concepts

Comparisons: World literature represented by writers such as
Borges, Lispector, Vila-Matas, García Márquez
Maupassant, Proulx, Whitehead, Krauss
Ondaatje, Coetzee, among others

Questions?

Contact the instructor at egrimm@barnard.edu
Comparative Literature and Translation Studies Program at BARNARD COLLEGE