

KAFKA FOR KIDS

By Kelsey Osgood

June 19, 2013



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As a child growing up in suburban Connecticut, I was fortunate to have many books, but my favorite by far was a chestnut, leather-bound Encyclopaedia Britannica. I spent hours cross-legged on the carpet flipping through each volume, but I remember only the three things I repeatedly

returned to: Sylvia Plath, Nostradamus, and Biafra. I read Plath's entry so many times that twenty years later I can still recite some of it verbatim. "Horror of childbirth." Self-mutilation. *Oven*. It was like a nightmare, and I was enraptured. While my own obsessions might have been particularly gloomy, they were no less monstrous than the adult-sanctioned books I owned. In my tiny library sat such classics as "The BFG," by Roald Dahl, in which a girl is plucked from her bed by an ogre, and "Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark," a veritable catalogue of grotesqueries accompanied by the most spine-tingling drawings I've ever seen. Another favorite was the sunny-covered "D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths." Though it looked benign, it featured the story of Cronos, who ate and regurgitated his children.

Childhood attraction to the morbid, and its function in storytelling for kids, has been widely acknowledged since the publication of "The Uses of Enchantment" by the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, in 1974. Even so, Matthue Roth, a thirty-four-year-old writer and video-game designer, is usually met with befuddlement when he tells people he has written a children's book of re-told Kafka stories. The idea came to him while spending a lazy afternoon at his home in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn, with his two daughters, now three and five years old. He read aloud to them the story "Jackals and Arabs"—about a group of talking canines who beg a European traveller to help them slaughter the Arabs—and their delighted reaction was the seed that grew into "My First Kafka: Runaways, Rodents, and Giant Bugs," published this week.

Roth searched the Internet for translations of Kafka in the public domain, read the famous Muir versions, skimmed over the German for kicks (he doesn't speak the language), and finally chose which stories to include in his volume. "The Metamorphosis" was a shoe-in but would have to be cut into singsongy verse. "Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse People," one of his old favorites, about a singer and her adoring audience, was next. Roth found this layered, melancholy story the most difficult to edit, and ended up returning to it numerous times before he was able to cut it down into shorter, kid-

friendly portions. The final choice was the minuscule “Excursion into the Mountains,” a prose poem in which the speaker imagines travelling into the mountains with “a pack of nobodies.” Roth turned the sexless narrator into a young girl, but other than that it was the only piece that required no changes, as the original evokes a thrilling Sendak-ian air of abandon. “It’s like all my favorite books as a child,” Roth says, “where you’re ecstatic but you’re not sure whether you’re completely in control or completely out of control.”

The adaptation is so smooth, and the stories so naturally eerie and imaginative, that if it rhymed one would assume Seuss wrote it. “During the day / Gregor crawled back and forth / along the walls / and the ceiling,” Roth writes. The three tales are accompanied by the illustrations of Rohan Daniel Eason, whose predominantly black-and-white drawings are comprised of dizzying, wispy-lined details beside thick walls of black. He decorates the Nobodies in “Excursion” with menacing black curlicues and makes the pitiable Gregor Samsa ornate and enormous. The over-all effect is a cross between Edward Gorey and a dichromatic “Yellow Submarine.”

When I first heard the concept of “My First Kafka,” I thought it was a wonderful idea, but I assumed it would be one of those books masquerading as being for children when it was really for adults, a cross between “Shrek” and the best-selling “Go the F**k to Sleep.” The thrust of it would fly right over kids’ heads, but their parents would be delighted for a break from “Clifford the Big Red Dog.” But it turns out this book really is meant for kids, even though it is also terrifying. Kafka’s oeuvre is, on the surface, no more frightening than Lewis Carroll’s, Roald Dahl’s, or Neil Gaiman’s; what happens in his universe is not all that different from what occurs in traditional fairy tales. (Kafka himself was a great fan of fairy tales; his lover and onetime fiancée Dora Diamant said he used to read the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen to her.) In fact, most of Kafka’s work is in many ways superficially less gruesome than fairy tales, and the supernatural plays a more limited role, if it enters the narrative at all. “The

Metamorphosis,” with its rapid transformation of a man into a giant bug, is an outlier. In most of Kafka’s writings, the protagonist is at the mercy of some arbitrary terror that wreaks small but subtle havoc. He shows us the potential horrors of life in a way that both resembles it and is distanced from it. It is so close to reality, and yet it is not reality, as in Freud’s *das unheimliche*.

It’s easy to brush aside traditional fairy tales and their modern retellings because we have lost our belief in the overtly fabulous, but what Kafka describes becomes more frightening to us as we age. We are sure, as mature people with 401(k)s and digital subscriptions to the *Times*, that we will never be stalked by an amorous, sparkly vampire, but we are not sure that we won’t be charged and prosecuted for a crime we aren’t even sure we committed. We can tell our children that there is no Big Bad Wolf, but we can’t assure them that they won’t be prevented from reaching their goals by an unseen bureaucracy intent upon burying them in paperwork. In this way—not the bloody, but the banal—Kafka’s work becomes more spooky than the original Brothers Grimm, in which Snow White’s evil queen is forced to dance to death in scalding iron shoes. And though this might be taken as an argument for sheltering kids from Kafka, consider that the urge to avoid feeling fear altogether is stronger in grown-up humans than in small ones. “Grownups desperately need to feel safe,” Maurice Sendak said in 1993, “and then they project that onto the kids. But what none of us seem to realize is how smart kids are... they’ll go for the hard concepts, they’ll go for the stuff where they can learn something.” Perhaps Kafka’s works can be best confronted by children, who have that empyrean way of digesting the surreal and decoding symbols, who are braver, in their innocent beliefs, than we can ever be.

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Illustration by Rohan Daniel Eason.