

THE UNBEARABLE SLIGHTNESS

Why do we love Milan Kundera, again?

By Cristina Nehring

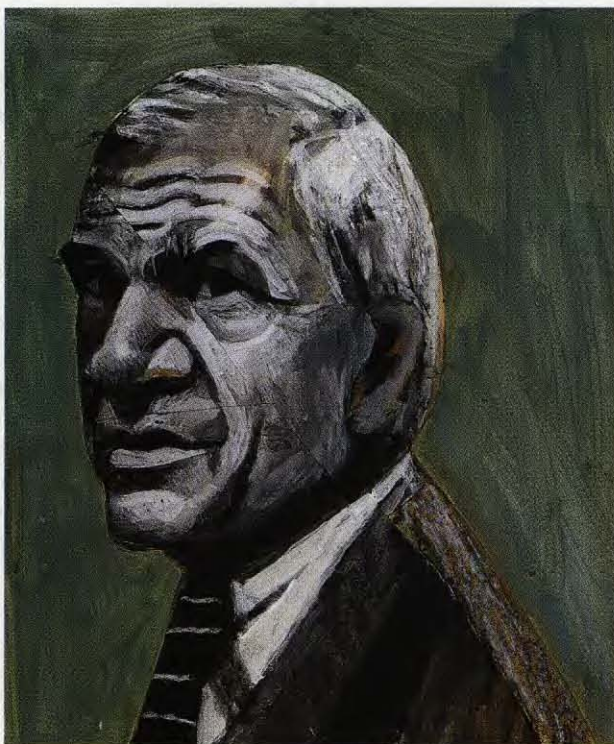
Discussed in this essay:

Ignorance, by Milan Kundera. HarperCollins, 2002. 208 pages. \$23.95.

Milan Kundera has always had it both ways. He has lived in a glass house and thrown stones. He has cashed in on his tragic émigré status and mocked those who paid. He has asked to be pitied as a Czech and abandoned the Czechs. He has written provocative fictions and forbidden us to be provoked—dictating, in his essays, the terms under which his novels must be analyzed. Critics, by and large, have been compliant, parting to let Kundera pass. The combination of victimization, exoticism, and intelligence seems to make cowards of us all.

Kundera left Czechoslovakia for France in 1975, seven years after the Russian invasion that turned the Prague Spring into deepest totalitarian winter. It was then that his international reputation soared—in part, at least, because he presented himself (in the words of one observer) as the “representative of ‘Czech Fate,’” a fate to which the West was extremely sympathetic at the time. Nor did he miss an opportunity to reinforce the value of that sympathy: Art from Prague (and from Budapest and Warsaw), he intoned, portrays “hu-

man experience of a kind people here in the West cannot even imagine, it offers a new testimony about mankind.”



“If someone had told me as a boy: One day you will see your nation vanish from the world, I would have considered it nonsense,” he mused in an interview with Philip Roth in 1980. “A man . . . takes it for granted that his nation possesses a kind of eternal life.” Since then he has had to realize not only that his “Bohemia” (as he affectionately calls Czechoslovakia) might merge with Russian civilization

but that this could very well signal “the beginning of the end for Europe as a whole.” From there it is not far to “the destruction of the world” about which Roth was interrogating him.

It is ironic (and typical) that even while Kundera was cultivating the image of the Doom-Saying Exile in public, he was mocking it—and the people who fell for it—in his fiction. The famous *Unbearable Lightness of Being* features a scene in which Sabina, an exiled Czech painter, receives the brochure for her upcoming German exhibition and sickens at the sight of the barbed wire dramatically transposed over her face. She knows that it is this image that will endear her to her sentimental Western buyers, but she also knows it for a cynical hoax; she has never laid eyes on barbed wire, she

has suffered little from the loss of her country, and its fate leaves her rather cool.

Does the fate of “Bohemia” still enthrall Kundera? His most recent novel suggests he is upset that anybody thinks it should. Irena, the heroine of *Ignorance*, is, like Sabina, a Kundera double, certainly with respect to the psychology of exile. A Czech émigré living (like her creator) in Paris, she is taken aback when a French girlfriend, hearing of the fall of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia during the so-called Velvet Revolution of 1989, suggests she should want to go back. “But Sylvie!” exclaims Irena. “It’s not just a matter of practical things, the job, the apartment. I’ve been living here for twenty years now. My life is here!”

Under pressure from boy- and girlfriends alike, she does, however, return to Prague for a visit—and finds, God help her, that her former intimates are drinking beer, not wine. She brings them a fine case of Bordeaux, a case any Parisian would esteem and which she thinks her friends should esteem the more, deprived as they have been, poor sots. But they spurn it! They actually *prefer* beer. Her nightmares are confirmed. She cannot

Cristina Nehring's last review for Harper's Magazine, "Last the Night," appeared in the July issue.

live in this country a second time—not, that is, unless she is prepared to “lay my whole life . . . solemnly on the altar of the homeland and set fire to it. Twenty years of my life spent abroad would go up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony.”

Despite the melodrama (Irena also talks, at least three times, of “amputating her forearm and attaching [her] hand directly to the elbow,” a metaphor, apparently, for resuming life in Bohemia), her reasons for not wishing to return are as banal as they are sensible. She doesn’t want to go back because she doesn’t want to go back. Why should she? Life is good in France. Her lover, a Swede, has freely left his hometown, and nobody is telling him to return. On the contrary, he is considered admirably cosmopolitan, whereas she is thought saddeningly callous. We take Kundera’s point. He is right about Irena. But this novel—more transparently, mercenarily, and querulously, it seems, than any of his previous books—is about Kundera. And it is not about Kundera’s being allowed to turn his back on the Czech Republic and remain in Paris (there’s no contest there: he’s done so for thirteen years now, since the demise of European Communism). It is, rather, about his right to turn his back, remain in Paris, and continue to enjoy the mystique and authority of the suffering Czech exile.

This has proven difficult. For Kundera, like Irena, has smarted from the withdrawal of Special Sympathy. “The more Kundera resembles the French, the less he interests them,” announced the *Journal du Dimanche* a few years back. After 1989, “I wasn’t interesting anymore,” Irena echoes bleakly. The French, she explains,

had really done a lot for me. They saw me as the embodiment of an émigré’s suffering. Then the time came for me to confirm that suffering by my joyous return to the homeland. And that confirmation didn’t happen. They felt duped. And so did I, because up till then I’d thought they loved me not for my suffering but for my self.

Plainly, this is Kundera’s rebuke to us too, though it rings more hollow coming from him than from Irena, first

because of the important part he played in the mythologization of his own misfortune, and second because his reputation is still riding very high in the West, despite the fact that it has plummeted in his homeland. These days, much of “Bohemia” celebrates Kundera’s failures; bad reviews in Paris make happy headlines in Prague. But this is more than simply a case of a prophet spurned in his own land. After climbing to glory on the backs (or at least reputations) of his fellow Czechs, Kundera has not only abandoned but seriously and repeatedly snubbed them. Ever since he began writing in French rather than in Czech, he has seen to it that none of his new books—and there have been five—are translated into his native language. It is almost unthinkable that *Ignorance* will prove an exception to this rule, replete, as it is, with insults to all things Czech, from the new accents (“nasal” and “unpleasantly blasé”) to the old dining habits (“beer mugs” and “macabre dentures”).

Nor will Kundera allow for the reedition in the Czech Republic of most of his old books, which, censored as they were under Communism, are not in adequate circulation even now. First, he says, he must compare them to their French translations, which he now considers more “definitive” than the Czech originals, since they incorporate changes he made after publication. But for this, alas, time is too short. He must give “radical priority” to new projects. And, of course, he has a steady supply of “unacceptable” English translations he must redo. He redid the English version of *The Joke*, his first novel, five times.

Among English translators, then, and Czech readers, Kundera has few friends. But among critics he remains greatly admired, his fall from émigré grace notwithstanding. Is this legitimate? Should we love Kundera for himself rather than for his suffering, his exoticism, his Central European sexiness? *Ignorance* does not give us much reason. To be sure, it features a full display of vintage Kundera moves: the surprise love triangle, the peremptory narrator, lengthy flashbacks, engineered coincidences, an etymology lesson, kinky sex, self-conscious storytelling (“Out of the mists of time . . . I see a

young girl emerge”), and the inter-splicing of multiple narratives that unexpectedly intersect, through sex (again), in the end. But whereas several of these devices astonished and delighted the first, second, third, or even fourth time Kundera used them, in *Ignorance* they seem worn, mechanical, pale. The “surprise” connections are predictable to any Kundera reader; the unusually long flashbacks are unusually dull, in part because we hardly care about the *present* of the bland characters in this book, much less about their past. The etymology lesson with which the novel opens (after a brief introductory dialogue) metastasizes into a mythology lesson, a history lesson, and a musicology lesson. Kundera’s already loquacious narrator has turned taxingly didactic; indeed he seems to have been transformed into Professor Avenarius from Kundera’s *Immortality*.

But what of Kundera’s strongest suits—his trenchant psychological observations, his provocative generalizations, his bold, aphoristic philosophical reflections? For these, in my view, are his greatest gifts to the modern novel: the gift of the Essay-in-the-Novel. Following Robert Musil (one of his favorite authors), Kundera has helped free today’s novelists from the ubiquitous taboo against reflecting as well as rendering. Effective as the conventional wisdom to “show, not tell” may be in getting a story across dramatically, it truncates what contemplative talent novelists may have in forcing them to censor their thoughts about the questions their tales evoke. It forces them, in some fashion, to play dumb, to refrain from all comment, to transcribe a dialogue, a crisis, a crime, and then sit back poker-faced and leave all speculation to the reader. This is a piety of our literary age, a piety that has prevented a terrible lot of tedious sermonizing, no doubt—a lot of easy harm—but also some difficult potential good. And Kundera, in some of his novels, has gloriously and productively exploded this piety.

Immortality abounds with engaging, often paradoxical, ideas; if they do not inspire assent, they jolt us into self-examination and into scrutiny of our own creed. Kundera is thought-provoking whether he is discussing modernity

("To be absolutely modern means to be the ally of one's gravediggers"), defending appearances ("When we are no longer interested in how we are seen by the person we love, it means we no longer love"), or contemplating our obsession with speed:

Before roads and paths disappeared from the landscape, they had disappeared from the human soul: man stopped wanting to walk... What's more, he no longer saw his own life as a road, but as a highway: a line that led from one point to another, from the rank of captain to the rank of general, from the role of wife to the role of widow. Time became a mere obstacle to life.

Ignorance contains an idea or two worth pausing over, but for the most part the generalizations in this book are banal, dubious, pompous, or—most often—all three. "To die [is] much easier for an adolescent than for an adult," Kundera tells us at one point. "All predictions are wrong, that's one of the few certainties granted to mankind," he notes elsewhere. What is sad about such lame pronouncements, especially coming from Kundera, is that they would seem to confirm what many contemporary literary scholars think anyway: that any aphorism is a bad aphorism, that virtue and interest lie exclusively in specific rather than in general observation, and that, indeed, as a rare critic of Kundera once wrote in *The New Republic*, aphorisms have no place in literature and are "inimical to [its] very spirit." Yet aphorisms have every place in literature; to expel them is to expel comprehensive thought. How much poorer would we be without Shakespeare's sententiae (it's not his plots that we know by heart, after all), or La Rochefoucauld's, or Goethe's or Thoreau's or Nietzsche's or—yes—some of Kundera's. What do not have a place in literature are lazy, throw-away aphorisms, and these are what we get, en masse, in *Ignorance*.

It is not only the generalizations in this book that are idle; the whole thing reads like the work of a man who is tired of his inventions, tired of his audience. It meanders about chitchattily, telling us about the various roots of the word "nostalgia" (one of which is "ignorance"—thus the title), and assembling some famous ex-

iles (Ulysses, Arnold Schoenberg) for sporadic discussion. We are introduced to Irena's longtime lover, Gustaf, married to a woman in Sweden but residing in Paris and dreaming of Prague: it is he, not Irena, who decides that they will open a business office and begin spending time there. In this way, the couple reunites with Irena's brother and detested mother, a woman whose "vitality" has always intimidated and eclipsed her daughter. As Gustaf feels ever closer to his girlfriend's family, Irena feels ever more distant from him and begins to fall in love with Josef, a man she knew briefly in her youth, who is now living as an émigré in Denmark and visiting Prague as reluctantly as she. A soul mate? she wonders. Kundera disabuses us of this hope through the postmodern but rather facile method of making us look over Josef's shoulder as he reads his old diaries. It is safe to say that nothing—really nothing—happens in the *present* of these characters until the last twenty-five pages of the book, when, almost as an afterthought, almost as if to rouse us from our slumbers before it's time to go, Kundera tacks on a couple of tawdry and taboo-busting sex scenes. They are sufficiently raunchy to awaken us—in one, Irena's mother seduces her lover; in the other, Irena is undone herself—but at the same time they sound disturbingly familiar. Disturbingly, first of all, because so many of Kundera's situations sound recycled by this time and, secondly, because what's being recycled is so, well, venomous.

It is a miracle of recent literary history that Kundera has gone unskewed by feminists. With the exception of a very diplomatic and qualified book about Kundera's "simultaneous" feminism and unfeminism by John O'Brien, and one or two unqualified but formidably lonely protests like that of *Vanity Fair*'s withering James Wolcott in a review of *Immortality*, there has been extremely little criticism of Kundera from feminist quarters. On one hand, this is refreshing; on the other hand, one wonders how Kundera is getting away with it.

It's not, as an interviewer once suggested, that Kundera's women are less educated than his men, or even that they are less voluble in the debates that punctuate his novels. Rather it is



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I know she is dead. Soon I shall go mad with grief. I loved her so, Maman. How to say goodbye? The soul of her days flowered purely. Whatever caused its shortness, her life was spent in grace, an ever-joyful present. Blessed be the soul too young for thought of future. She has gone home to You, Maman.

There. Have I told it true?

"Yes, my child," said the Goodbye Goddess.

"Et in Arcadia, Io."

(from the diary of the Grail Girl)

When we went into the room, we found her in the bathroom. She was talking to this giant earwig in the tub. I swear I heard more than one voice, man. She said the damn thing was telepathic, was telling her to get out, run, vamoose. Goddam if the critter wasn't right....

Harry's in a hurry, says to her, "Get dressed, we're going on a trip." We wait outside in the car. After awhile she still isn't out, so we go back in. She's gone. I'm thinking, Well, fucked by an earwig!

(prison interview with Guy Marx)

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the recurrent and imaginatively sadistic way in which he portrays them in sexual situations that should give us pause for consideration. A number of Kundera protagonists confess that they enjoy watching damsels in distress (two recent examples are *Immortality's* Professor Avenarius and Josef, who, as a teenager, provoked and counted his girlfriend's tears because they so excited him). One wonders if it is not something of the same for Kundera. *Ignorance* ends with a situation one could safely call prototypical of his work. A woman in love—just out of coitus—is not merely abandoned by the hero but, more importantly, disfigured, and humiliated by the author. It is not enough that Irena is bedded and deserted by Josef. She has to be portrayed as being bedded obscenely, drunkenly, ridiculously—her sober companion keeps warning her to stop emptying so many vodka bottles during sex—finally passing out with her legs splayed open. The scene is worth quoting. “Her sobs went on for a long time” (she has just understood that her beloved will leave her):

and then, as if by a miracle, they stopped, followed by heavy breathing: she fell asleep; this change was startling and sadly laughable. . . . [S]he was still on her back with her legs spread.

He was still looking at her crotch, that tiny little area that, with admirable economy of space, provides for four sovereign functions: arousal, copulation, procreation, urination. He gazed a long while at that sad place with its spell broken, and was gripped by an immense, immense sadness.

Putting aside, for a moment, the immense, immense klunkiness of this passage, it is heartbreaking. Here is the abandoned woman, awash in alcohol and emotion, passed out in the most vulnerable and “laughable” possible position, with the man she loves clinically contemplating her used and discarded genitalia. The description serves no purpose in terms of either plot or character revelation. It seems gratuitous, even sadistic, the more so when we realize that uncannily similar scenes recur in so many Kundera novels. Consider, for example, *The Joke*, not only because it is his first novel and *Ignorance* is his most recent (we can observe a certain career consistency) but because,

like *Ignorance*, *The Joke* is ostensibly a novel of “return.” The hero, Ludvik, returns not to his home country but to his home village, and, like his colleagues in *Ignorance*, hates it. Like Josef, he seduces a woman, named Helena, while he’s visiting. Like Irena, Helena is in the process of being betrayed by her man—in this case, by her husband, who is leaving her for a student. In Ludvik, Helena sees not only an adored companion but her escape route from marital tragedy, and she gives herself to him with all the weight of a life. Like Irena, she drinks up a small storm while she makes love with him. Like Josef, Ludvik warns his mistress prudently away from her umpteenth vodka and recoils from her in horror the moment intercourse is completed.

She kissed me; it made my flesh creep but I couldn’t turn my gaze away from her; I was fascinated by her idiotic blue eyes and by her (animated, quivering) naked body.

But now I saw her nudity in a new light; it was nudity *denuded*, denuded of the power to excite that until now had eliminated all the faults of age. . . . [H]er physical unloveliness lost all its power to excite and it too became only itself: a simple unloveliness.

The mixture of scientific curiosity and repulsion with which he studies her demystified body is the same, exactly, as Josef’s with Irena. Only Helena draws her own degradation even further: ignorant of the fact that she’s about to be dumped, and delightedly in love with her companion, she starts to dance for joy. Ludvik’s response is cold disgust: “She did a clumsy imitation of the undulating movements of the twist (I stared aghast at her breasts flying from side to side).”

But it’s not over till it’s over. Kundera has further humiliation in store for his heroine. When she realizes she has been snatched from one betrayal only to be tossed more brutally into a second, she is driven to suicide. Kundera is not in the habit of granting his women characters dignity in tragedy. She attempts to swallow a bottle of sleeping pills, and, as luck would have it, she swallows a bottle of laxatives instead. So the book ends with Helena defecating all over herself. It ends with her being dragged from an outhouse; her

trying—in shame and desperation—to flee, and collapsing over her own lowered lingerie.

Ludicrously botched suicides are big in Kundera’s *oeuvre*. They are big, that is, among women. Indeed, the previously mentioned love triangle in *Ignorance* includes a Czech friend of Irena’s who possesses only one ear. Why? She tried to kill herself when Josef broke her heart, decades before. She, too, downed sleeping tablets—real ones, this time—and then she lay down in the snow to die. Unfortunately she took too few, and rather than expire mysteriously she revived ridiculously: half-frozen, she had to slog back to her ski camp, apologize, and get her ear amputated. Since then, Kundera tells us, she has preferred beauty to love; she has sacrificed the possibility of intimacy to the secret of her disfigurement. She keeps her hair down in a careful tie and refuses to be touched.

What to make of these situations? Their recurrence, their inventiveness, their lingering detail, make it difficult to think of them as coincidences, gestures toward realism, or anything, really, besides scenarios preferred by their creator. An added touch: the men in these tales consistently hunger for male company after their bulimic entanglement with women. They are filled with disgust for the feminine bodies in whose filth they have wallowed, and long, wholesomely, for absolution among males: “I opened the window, because I yearned for a wind to waft away all memory of my ill-starred afternoon [with Helena],” declares Ludvik:

and when I felt all traces had been removed, I sank into the armchair near the window and looked forward (almost imploringly) to Kostka; to his masculine voice (I had a great need for a deep male voice), to his long, skinny frame and flat chest . . .

In *Ignorance*, Irena’s faithless Gustaf—conceived, though he is, thirty-five years after Ludvik—feels very much the same after sleeping with his girlfriend’s mother. Whereas Ludvik looks forward to his old homeboy, Gustaf looks forward to his new “son”:

From the bathroom comes the sound of water. . . . In two hours he is expecting the son of his most recent mistress, a

man, young, who admires him. Gustaf will introduce him this evening among his business friends. His whole life has been surrounded by women! What a pleasure, finally, to have a son! He smiles and begins to look for his clothes...

Why is it that feminists—or other humans—have not noticed such crude misogyny? Not that it is not part of our world, not that it does not occur, not that it makes Kundera a worse writer—maybe it makes him the richer and more revelatory writer—but at least it should be noticed and responded to in some not quite business-as-usual fashion.

But then, again, Kundera has always had it both ways. He has written outrageous things in his fiction and very elegantly and authoritatively forbidden people to take offense at them in his critical essays. His novels, he has said repeatedly, contain no “ideologies” or “simplistic” stereotypes; they represent the diversity of “human existence”—the “bisexual” diversity, to use a term he coined in an interview. Nothing old here; his *oeuvre* offers “a new testimony of mankind.”

But does it? Or is Kundera, to the contrary, increasingly fatigued with his own aging stereotypes, self-referential complacencies, and long-standing ease at manipulating the reader? In *Slowness* (1994), “Kundera’s” wife urges him to write “A Big Piece of Nonsense for Your Own Pleasure.” Why would an author cite such advice? Why does his partner proffer it? Only because the author is bored almost to distraction, and his wife knows as much. And as we finish *Ignorance*, we know as much. Kundera is half sick of his own shadows; his postmodern gymnastics look like thumb-twiddling; his once bracing maxims have dwindled into cliché; the notorious coital scenes that—according to his testimony to Philip Roth—served, at one point, to capture the deepest “essence” of his characters, now appear accidental, un-revelatory. And ugly.

Critics have been cowed by Kundera’s eloquence and his Easternness. We have taken his word for his own worth. It is time we replace it with our own. It is time we see if, indeed, we like this very talented, very spoiled, and temporarily very tired man for himself—rather than for his suffering. ■

A HERO TO HIS VALET

An underling spies on the Supreme Court

By Jeff Greenfield

Discussed in this essay:

The Forgotten Memoir of John Knox: A Year in the Life of a Supreme Court Clerk in FDR’s Washington, edited by Dennis J. Hutchinson and David J. Garrow. University of Chicago Press, 2002. 288 pages. \$32.50.



Had Balzac turned his wit on our nation’s capital, the resulting novel might have been the story of John Knox, a well-born young man of uncertain talent, wanton ambition, and laughable arrogance who served as clerk to one of the most lordly, and personally repellent, figures of the 1930s. Knox arrived in Washington in the middle of a fractious political dispute—and found himself beholden to the fearsome James C. McReynolds, then associate justice of the Supreme Court

of the United States, who exerted a tyrannical sway over his household. From his humble place, Knox got distorted glimpses of an urgent political drama, through which Washington swells regularly passed. In the meantime, he learned the era’s social rituals and once-respected bigotry from two servants in the great man’s home.

On second thought, even a master satirist would not have invented so unlikely a narrative as Knox’s, which is provided instead in his newly published diary, *The Forgotten Memoir of John Knox: A Year in the Life of a Supreme Court Clerk in FDR’s Washington*. Retrieved by academics sixty years after the period it documents,

Jeff Greenfield is an author and CNN senior analyst. His most recent book, *Oh Waiter, One Order of Crow* (Putnam), is an account of election night 2000.

Illustration by Jennifer Renninger. Photograph of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and John Knox (left) by Alger Hiss, courtesy University of Chicago Press. Photograph of the Supreme Court, October term 1936 (right) by Harris & Ewing, collection of the Supreme Court