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GALLERIES • WEEKEND

## Bohemian Rhapsody: The Love Songs of Franz Kafka

How did a sharply dressed insurance agent with a desultory love life, who preferred brothels to relationships, who held crappy middle management jobs before retiring early due to poor health, become, as his one-time lover Milena Jesenská puts it, a “clairvoyant” storyteller, let alone one with a still-unrivalled capacity to take readers deep into the cold core of what it means to be alone and to be human?



Tim Keane | 3 hours ago

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Franz Kafka, video still from “Letters in the Dark” by Doug Hall (2016) (© Doug Hall / Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery, NYC)

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“He has never fled to any refuge, not one [...] He lacks even the smallest shelter. That is why he is exposed to everything we are protected from.”

This firsthand account of novelist Franz Kafka was penned by his friend and lover Milena Jesenská and appears in the invaluable appendices to *Letters to Milena* (Schocken Books, 1990). In another passage, noting Kafka’s visionary powers, she adds, “he knows ten thousand times more about the world than anyone else.”

Jesenská’s insights into Kafka’s psyche – “he is a naked man among the dressed” – pinpoint the vulnerability and observational acumen that allowed him to become, through his fictions, a prophet of the twentieth-century’s impending nightmares.



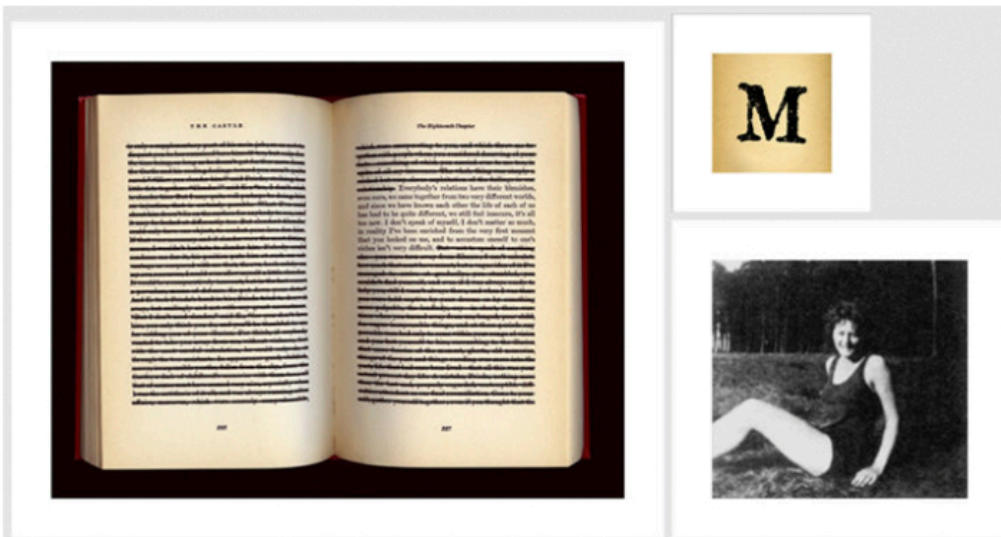
Milena Jesenská (via Wikipedia)

Jesenská knew from whence she spoke. A savvy, freethinking Czech woman living in Vienna and unhappily married to a philandering member of the city’s literati, she was in her mid-twenties when she befriended Kafka, albeit from afar.

Kafka was then in his late thirties and his published stories had gained modest notice in and around his home city of Prague. Jesenská translated some of this work from German into Czech and conducted a regular correspondence with the writer that lasted four years. For one of

those years, Jesenská was briefly Kafka’s lover.

Their star-crossed romance is the subject of photographer Doug Hall’s exhibition and multimedia installation *Letters in the Dark: Franz Kafka and Milena Jesenská* at Benrubi Gallery. It features 15 photographic prints by Hall, many of them strikingly composed images of Kafka’s stomping grounds in and around Prague. These include the baroque façades of Austro-Hungarian buildings bathed in sunlight, and their ornate and strangely forbidding stairwells and corridors, as well as the leafy overgrowth in the Jewish and Christian graveyards in Prague — representative of Kafka and Jesenská’s respective religious upbringings.



Doug Hall, “M, triptych” (2016), two chromogenic prints and one archival pigment print, overall size 27 x 43 3/4 inch, edition of 6 (© Doug Hall / Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery, NYC)



However, the exhibition's main attraction is a dual projection video with that brings to life the correspondence – with all of its psychological and emotional divides – between Kafka and Jesenská. It features rarely seen archival photographs of Kafka and Jesenská, alongside Hall's original black-and-white still photographs and zooming film clips of doorways, windows, candles, flowers and landscapes. A subdued soundtrack of musical interludes from Leoš Janáček and Dmitri Shostakovich accompanies two voiceover actors reading from Kafka and Jesenská's letters. Most of the letters represent the preludes and aftermaths of their two fleeting assignations.

But there is a crucial caveat to these letter readings. Jesenská's letters to Kafka were all destroyed, at her request, shortly after he died. As a result, the Jesenská letters featured in the video are Hall's recreations, informed by the tone, texture, and, here and there, word-for-word snippets lifted from Jesenská's extant writings on Kafka. The move runs the risk of implying that Jesenská was as romantically invested in Kafka as he was in her.

Though Jesenská was unhappily married, she was also, as evidenced in the Schocken compilation, clear-eyed, sanguine and pragmatic. Writing skeptically on the institution of marriage, she says, "The only good reason for two people to get married is [that] it is impossible for them not to." On the subject of Kafka, the record suggests she was probably just as circumspect. She calls him alternately "shy, anxious, meek and kind" and a "weak" man of "nervous sensitivity" who is "unable to live." On the subject of artists in general she might be alluding to her lover when she speaks of how "grotesquely strange" they can be. How much of these opinions she insinuated in her letters to Kafka we will never know.

Kafka, on the other hand, aches over their impracticable romance. Frequently he translates that feeling into accounts of dreams about Jesenská, and other times he finds metaphors for the obstacles to their union in the imagery of closed doors, impenetrable walls, and dimly lit walks.



Doug Hall, "Train Station at the Southern Edge of Prague on the Line to Vienna" (2016), chromogenic print, 30 x 36 3/4 inches, edition of 6 (© Doug Hall / Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery, NYC)

Mostly, the letters allude to the real-life impediments to their affair rather than addressing them directly. Those impediments were substantial. An age gap of thirteen years was compounded by the physical distance between Vienna and Prague. Then there was the bald fact of her being married to someone else. In classic Kafka fashion, the lovers seem to be speaking *at* each other as much as *to* each other. Her allusions to patience are at odds with his entrenched anxieties about meeting up.

The record indicates that the two met and consummated their affair in late June and early July of 1920, when Kafka visited her in Vienna. Their second, less happy rendezvous took place later that same year when they met in Gmünd on the Czech-Austrian border, a tryst they cut short and which Kafka lamented in his journals as a disaster. After that, the letters evolved, or devolved, into a fond literary friendship.

As if to rescue meaning from this biographical messiness, Hall has framed vintage portraits of the lovers in diptychs and triptychs beside photos of redacted pages from Kafka's *The Castle* (posthumously published in 1926), the novel which he was writing at that time of his involvement with Jesenská.





Doug Hall, "The Castle, diptych" (2016), edition of 6 (© Doug Hall / Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery, NYC)

Biographers have mined Kafka's short and uneventful life for clues to his fiction for almost a hundred years. Like those biographies, this exhibition can but briefly pull back the curtain of history to provide glimpses of what made the novelist tick. While *The Castle* features a lovelorn antihero en route to meet an unidentifiable authority figure in a realm stripped of signposts, so too do Kafka's other works, many of them written well before he knew Jesenská. For all its revelations, *Letters in the Dark* preserves – and perhaps magnifies — the mystery about the flesh-and-blood man

How did a sharply dressed insurance agent with a desultory love life, who preferred brothels to relationships, who held crappy middle management jobs before retiring early due to poor health, become, as Milena Jesenská puts it, a "clairvoyant" storyteller, let alone one with a still-unrivalled capacity to take readers deep into the cold core of what it means to be alone and to be human?

Born in 1883, Kafka was raised in a German-speaking Jewish family in Prague in a milieu of toxic anti-Semitism. By most accounts his father was a vicious intimidator who likely served as the archetype for the faceless and nameless male authority figures who oversee the urban labyrinths in his stories.

Despite his father's relentless verbal abuse, Kafka, like his character Gregor Samsa in the novella "The Metamorphosis" (1915), shouldered his family's expectations conscientiously. He studied law at Charles University. Though his studies reflected a side interest in the arts, he went on to practice law, first at an Italian firm called Assicurazioni Generali and then at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia.

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Doug Hall, "Central Vestibule, The Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, Na Poříčí 7, Prague" (2016), chromogenic print, 36 5/8 x 30 inches, edition of 6 (© Doug Hall / Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery, NYC)

As he indicates in letters to Jesenská, Kafka was engaged to be married three times, twice to Felice Bauer, a relative of his friend Max Brod. But he never wed. In 1924, shortly before what would have been his forty-first birthday, the tuberculosis that plagued him for years finally killed him. Throughout his relatively short life, in his free hours, he wrote parables, fables, novels and diaries with a vehemence that suggests a physiological compulsion to get at the truth.

That urgency imbues Kafka's writing with devastating honesty. Spelling out this need for revelation through storytelling, in his *Diaries* (1910-21, published in 1998) Kafka equates fiction with an imaginative obsessiveness infused with sacrificial courage: "[Writing] is so difficult [...] you experience a story within yourself from its



beginning, from the distant point up to the approaching locomotives of steel, coal and steam, you [...] want to be pursued by it [...] and of your own volition you run before it.”

Fittingly Milena Jesenská called his locomotive-like fictions “true, stark and painful.” They were radical in their time – and remain so today. Unlike much mainstream fiction then and now, Kafka’s works deflate humanism’s self-congratulatory rhetoric about progress and redemption. Stylistically, his stories strip off the soothing veneer of realism. Politically speaking, they unmask the benign disguises worn by those with power.

And as page turners, they are as engrossing as the works of Stephen King or John le Carré. Their plots pit characters against every indignity caused by society’s organizations, from the patriarchal family to daily workplaces to government courts and political systems and religious organizations, revealing the institutions that administer our lives to be exactly what we prefer to forget they are – inhumanly self-perpetuating and frighteningly anonymous.

But in using the term “Kafkaesque” to cavalierly describe any trivial befuddlement, we risk ignoring how far-reaching are the conditions described in his fiction.



Franz Kafka, “The Thinker” (1913) (via [openculture.com](https://www.openculture.com))

Our cheerful technocratic bromides about education, efficiency and advancement sometimes seem crafted to keep at bay the disturbing fact that we too inhabit Kafka’s nightmare worlds. Our journey toward consequential communication and companionship seems as convoluted and wearying as it is in his fictions. Invisible corporate powers and global bureaucracies guide how we date, socialize, raise and educate children, handle money, buy homes, seek

medical care, and even find a suitable place to die. And like the inaccessible codes that legislate reality in his stories, their rules are just as invisible, arbitrary and changing. Passwords lock us out of private spaces. Goon-like leaders spout non-sequiturs and when we ask, like Joseph K. in *The Trial*, what these words mean, their minions

explain away the malfeasance. Supporting agents read from scripts they have not written and cannot interpret. No one wielding power, Kafka knew, is ever answerable, and that goes for the universe, too.

In her published obituary for Kafka, Milena Jesenská writes that he refused to “take refuge” in “various fallacies or reason, or the unconscious” and that his works “embody the struggle of today’s generation throughout the world.”

Jesenská remained part of that generation, outliving Kafka by twenty years. During that time, she divorced and remarried, gave birth to a daughter and divorced again and went on to become a successful journalist. A political activist, she was arrested by the Nazis in 1939 and imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp where she died in 1944. The rest, unfortunately, is history.

[Doug Hall: Letters in the Dark: Franz Kafka and Milena Jesenská continues at Benrubi Gallery \(521 West 26th Street, 2nd floor, Chelsea, Manhattan\) through October 29.](#)

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