Demosthenes, Lord Elgin, and Lord Byron—as well as less familiar figures, such as the mournful, scholarly archbishop Michael of Chonae, who labored in the 12th century to restore the Parthenon. His forthrightly "moralizing history" contains a good deal that's inspiring and edifying, but also, unfortunately, much that's misleading.

Waterfield blames Athenian imperialism for the agonies of the fifth-century B.C.E. Peloponnesian War and gives a chilling, accurate description of Athenian hubris, exemplified in the eradication of Melos and Skione. But he doesn't grasp the complexity of the causes of the war. In his account, reluctant Spartans were "forced" to "confront Athens and its imperialist ambitions." In contrast, the Athenian general and historian Thucydides properly emphasized Sparta's fear of Athens's growth as well as Sparta's long-standing, bitter jealousy of Athens. Unlike Thucydides, Waterfield doesn't mention Athens's offer to submit to arbitration to avoid war, and he underreports Sparta's war crimes, such as the massacre of the Plataeans.

The book's moralizing builds on Waterfield's notion of an "Olympic spirit of Greek cooperation." Although he admits that the Olympic truce of Greek antiquity was little more than a guarantee of safe passage for competitors and spectators to and from Olympia, he wants to believe that wars generally subsided. But not only did Greece's internecine wars continue, the Olympic truce itself was broken on a few occasions and Olympia witnessed warfare in its own sacred precincts.

Scholars have long cautioned against investing the Olympics with undeserved moral status. In the case of the notorious 1936 games in Berlin, precisely this kind of weak history and fuzzy thinking caused the world to overlook the crimes of the hosts in the name of a putative Olympic ideal. In truth, the ancient Olympics were relentlessly competitive and ruthlessly individual; teams and teamwork were unknown. The actual Olympic ideal is no more evidence of the ancient Greeks' multiculturalism than is their term for non-Greek speakers, *barbaroi*—"barbarians."

Athens raises crucial questions about the past and challenges us to apply history to today's decisions ("If America could look back on Athens's story . . . it might learn to curtail its use of arms and to become a defender of true culture, not monotonous globalization"), but it doesn't offer the material that would allow us to do so judiciously. Waterfield's "Olympic ideal" is no more valid than his insistence on the moral equivalence of Robert Mugabe, Saddam Hussein, and the United States. The book might at least encourage readers to delve deeper, but the bibliography omits many seminal yet readable works. All in all, Athens deserves better than *Athens*.

—Michael Poliakoff

Arts & Letters

KAFKA:
A Biography.
By Nicholas Murray. Yale Univ. Press.
440 pp. $30

On July 12, 1914, Franz Kafka, an employee of the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague, was alone in his room when he was abruptly ambushed by three women: his fiancée, Felice Bauer (whom he would never marry); a colleague of hers, Grete Bloch (with whom he had been carrying on an intimate correspondence); and Erna Bauer, Felice's sister. Assuming a prosecutorial mode, Felice proceeded to read aloud portions of letters Kafka had written to Grete. It's not clear from Nicholas Murray's meticulous biography exactly what her accusations were. What is clear is that this incident, which Kafka later referred to as "the tribunal," was the direct inspiration for *The Trial*, his haunting novel about Joseph K., charged with an unspecified crime he didn't commit.

Kafka's stark visions of estrangement, persecution, and punishment have been read as prophesies of Nazism and Stalinism, yet their origins often lie not in any encounter

Franz Kafka mined the terrors he faced in everyday life to create his angst-ridden fiction.

with authoritarian power but in domestic or romantic conflicts that wouldn't seem out of place on *Beverly Hills 90210*. For the hypersensitive Kafka (1883–1924), just getting through an ordinary day could be the emotional equivalent of being arraigned by a despot's callous functionaries. "For even the most intimate friend to set foot in my room," he told Felice, "fills me with terror."

Kafka's anxiety in the face of the quotidian sometimes seems a tad histrionic. He once admitted, "I always feel 10 times better than I say; it's just my pen that runs away with me, that's all." And sometimes he seems weirdly proud of his angst, which he described to one girlfriend as "perhaps the best part" of him. What ailed Kafka? Was he clinically depressed? Sadomasochistic? (Diary entry: "This morning . . . the joy again of imagining a knife twisted in my heart.") Was his multiple outsider status—a German speaker in Prague, a Jew among Christians—a factor? Whatever his debility, it was lifelong.

Alas, therein lies the main problem with this book. Murray, whose previous works include biographies of Matthew Arnold, Aldous Huxley, and Bruce Chatwin, has done a conscientious job, but he's stuck with a drama in which the settings and supporting cast, and above all the protagonist's preoccupations and state of mind, change little over the years; the result is a largely monotonous slog through unvarying and terribly grim terrain. There's little real drama, as opposed to self-dramatization: We're immersed throughout in Kafka's feelings of alienation and self-disgust (to read this book is to understand Gregor Samsa's transformation, in "The Metamorphosis," into a giant insect), his resentful overattachment to his indulgent yet unaffectionate parents (with whom he lived all his 40 years in, says Murray, an atmosphere of "claustrophobic mutual surveillance"), and his inability to connect normally with women ("He could not bear to leave the bright, white cell of his self and put himself in another's hands, even though he longed for that consummation. . . . He seems not to have possessed the capacity for simple joy in another's love").

Kafka attributed his chronic psychological incapacity to having "vigorously absorbed the negative element of the age in which I live." Yet despite occasional promising glimpses beyond his narrow circle—he saw Nijinsky dance, attended lectures by Rudolf Steiner and Martin Buber, crossed paths with Einstein, Rilke, and Puccini, and vacationed at a naturist spa where he was known as "the man in the swimming trunks"—we don't get as much of a sense of the age, let alone of its "negative element," as we'd like. A book less relentlessly focused on Kafka's static inner world and more attentive to his outer world might have been at once more congenial and more illuminating.

—Bruce Bawer

I AM ALIVE AND YOU ARE DEAD: A Journey into the Mind of Philip K. Dick.
By Emmanuel Carrère. Translated by Timothy Bent. Metropolitan Books. 315 pp. $26

What better way for an author to be honored than to have his name become an adjective for the very thing he wrote about? Among science-fiction aficionados, the term "phildickian" has come to refer to tropes and