



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

tales that turn reality inside out or upside down. And the biggest fans of such tales are proud to call themselves “Dickheads.”

More of us are fans of Philip K. Dick (1928-82) than know it. You may not have read his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* but you’ve probably seen *Blade Runner*, the Ridley Scott movie based on it. You may not have read the short story “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale,” but there’s a good chance you’ve watched Arnold Schwarzenegger brawl his way through the screen version, *Total Recall*. Steven Spielberg’s *Minority Report* is based on fiction by Dick, as is the upcoming *A Scanner Darkly*, starring Keanu Reeves. In an increasingly erratic and tortured career, Dick managed to write more than 50 novels, a host of stories, and some 8,000 pages of unedited, often incomprehensible notes toward what he called his “grand Exegesis.” It’s an output that would be remarkable for any writer, but it’s all the more so for one afflicted by a legion of demons.

Agoraphobic, paranoid, possibly schizophrenic, overweight, suicidal, addicted to a raft of prescription medications (he simultaneously patronized a half-dozen doctors to keep himself supplied), a drinker, a smoker, his own worst enemy in almost every way imaginable, Dick nonetheless turned out a briskly paced and richly textured body of work. Though he spent most of his life in

dismal California backwaters, he traveled mentally to other worlds, imagining places where time moved backward and the dead rose from their graves, where animals had become so rare that people bought expensive robot pets, where criminals were caught before they committed their crimes, and where eager customers bought happy memories of events they hadn’t actually experienced. Dick’s work easily places him in the company of science-fiction icons Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, and Robert Heinlein.

Just how he accomplished so much is, unfortunately, left obscure in this sympathetic but self-indulgent portrait. “I have tried to depict the life of Philip K. Dick from the inside . . . with the same freedom and empathy—indeed with the same truth—with which he depicted his own characters,” explains French novelist Emmanuel Carrère. In practice, this means we get “imaginative recreations” of Dick’s actions, thoughts, and delusions, but no source notes, bibliography, or index. After dozens of pages imagining one or another hallucination or breakdown, it’s a great relief to seize on a verifiable fact, as if stumbling from a swamp onto dry land. Philip K. Dick often lost touch with reality—indeed, it became his trademark, in his life and in his art—but it’s too bad Carrère felt he had to follow suit.

—ROBERT MASELLO

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

FAT MAN FED UP: How American Politics Went Bad.

By Jack Germond. Random House.
224 pp. \$24.95

Jack Germond was always on my list of people I’d like to drink with through a long evening. I’m a political junkie, and he has been immersed in American politics for some 50 years, as a terrific reporter and columnist for the Gannett syndicate, *The Washington Star*, and *The Baltimore Sun*, and as a sometime (but not so successful) television talking head on *The McLaughlin Group* and elsewhere. I wanted to hear him tell war stories. Now, I can cross him off my

list. He has written a barroom rant that does the job.

Sort of.

There are lots of stories, although most of the ones starring politicians appeared in *The New York Times* when they happened, and many of the rest feature Germond as subject—and hero.

But *Fat Man Fed Up* is more confession than memoir. We see the emergence of a political soul once buried under the pretense of journalistic objectivity: a liberal Democrat with a fondness for cerebral and verbal candidates such as Morris Udall and Bill Bradley, politicians who find it