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*Kafka ist nicht rätselhaft: Argumente wider eine
hartnäckige Fehleinschätzung* by Gerhard Rieck (review)

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its archeological and ethnographical collection transgressing and communicating across cross-cultural divides. Identity-crafting is further discussed with regard to the multi-volume publication *Die österreichisch-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild*.

In conclusion, this work is a fine addition to art and architectural histories, making it a good read for those who are uninitiated not only in Islamic architecture but also in the role that this style played within the Habsburg lands. Of interest is not only the style, but the question as to why this style arose in Central Europe. It is well researched, and the addition of photos and illustrations enhance the deep intellectual and historical value of this work.

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Gerhard Rieck, *Kafka ist nicht rätselhaft: Argumente wider eine hartnäckige Fehleinschätzung*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2023. 141 pp.

The title of the short but compelling academic book by Gerhard Rieck, *Kafka ist nicht rätselhaft*, is catchy and intriguing; moreover, the forthright assertion contained in the title seems to imply that this book, along with Kafka's other writings, contains no riddles or mysteries and provokes no questions or debates.

This idea could appeal to some Kafka readers, imagining that once and for all, they might attain a clear and widely agreed upon understanding of the world-famous and much-discussed author. However, as the book's "Vorwort" tells us, Kafka's readers often do find his literary texts "fast unendlich undurchdringlich" or "unauflöslich rätselhaft" (9). Readers, students, professors, and critics generally admire and strive to interpret these qualities rather than wish that they could be erased or somehow simplified.

The author of this book, Gerhard Rieck, has here refuted many spoken or published claims, decade after decade, that Kafka's writings are indeed "rätselhaft"; they offer tantalizing or frustrating riddles or perhaps one complex mega-riddle, a view, according to Rieck, held by legions of subscribers to "hartnäckige" (hard-headed) misinterpretations. His previous books on Kafka are cited from time to time as sources of material for the present 2023 volume. Rieck's published books on Kafka include *Kafka Konkret—das Trauma ein*

Leben: Wiederholungsmotive im Werk als Grundlage einer psychologischen Deutung (1999), *Franz Kafka und die Literaturwissenschaft: Aufsätze zu einem kafkaesken Verhältnis* (2002), and even one entry that, puzzlingly enough, includes the word “Rätsel.” Its full title: *Kafkas Rätsel: Fragen und Antworten zu Leben, Werk, und Interpretation* (2014).

Rieck occasionally steps back and reflects on his role as an author, as in the comments, “Dieses Buch basiert auf meinen drei bisher veröffentlichten Kafka Interpretationen” (14). “Der Rest dieses Buches wird versuchen, diese Sätze glaubhaft zu machen” (9). Rieck here announces his intention to link his books on Kafka to the young writer’s first published work of fiction, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. That first publication is sometimes identified as a story, other times as a book because of its several differing versions of different lengths. Rieck sees that first publication as the keystone on which Kafka’s entire *oeuvre* rests.

Rieck makes several important points in the “Vorwort” and the pages that follow. For example, he refers to the influence of the often-cited but sometimes vaguely defined term *Kafkaesque*. Of the many possible examples, he highlights this definition: “die Unterdrückung des Individuum durch gesellschaftliche Mächte und Hierarchien” (1). More than twenty references to literary titles identifying literary works are named throughout the book; they usually accompany brief but insightful comments. One topic explored in Rieck’s book is that of “twins” or “doubles,” that is, repetitions and duplications of various types of things, places, or people as well as patterns and relationships among characters.

Three frequently analyzed fields of analysis in studies of Kafka are features of the writer’s own background and identity. These fields are law (his education and profession), art (including literature as an art form), and Judaism (the core of Kafka’s religious and cultural heritage, 10).

Features of Kafka’s literary texts also include mystical occurrences and fictional animals or other nonhuman creatures. Some of the negative forces that contribute to psychological experiences of the Kafkaesque, such as “die Unterdrückung des Individuum durch gesellschaftliche Mächte and Hierarchien” (1), are also highlighted.

In the first sentence of the “Vorwort” we find the following oft-repeated sentence: “Kafkas Texte sind die Beschreibung des Kampfes zwischen unversöhnlich gegensätzlichen Persönlichkeiten.” Sometimes this sentence is followed by the following thought: “Kafka ist der Dichter der inneren Feindlichkeit” (9). Here Rieck not only emphasizes struggle, conflict, and antipathy in Kafka’s

literature but also defines one of his goals as a writer, indicating that “[d]er Rest dieses Buches wird versuchen, diese Sätze glaubhaft zu machen” (9).

Also, in the spirit of connection between author and reader is a playful or whimsical collage created by the images on the book’s front cover. Displayed there is a photograph of Franz Kafka wearing a suit and tie. This portrait is partially merged with an image of an imaginary crossword puzzle, its challenging empty squares filled with names and German words related to this book or Kafka studies in general. The eight words so displayed are *Beschreibung*, *Unversöhnt*, *Kampf*, *Gegensatz*, *Anteile*, *Kafka*, *Texte*, and *Persönlichkeit*. Under this collage or completed puzzle (Rätsel) is a subtitle so small that it could easily be overlooked, giving the words a different meaning: “Argumente wider eine hartnäckige Fehleinschätzung.” This pointed verbal attack is aimed at those misguided believers in the notion that Kafka is “rätselhaft.” The subtitle incorporates argument, struggle, conflict, and antipathy and states the core thesis of this book.

Gerhard Rieck has challenged us with many insights into Kafka and his writings as well as views of various critics, including theorists such as Freud. However, perhaps the main message that we may “take away” from this material is the notion that we should go back to the beginning, to read and reread and come to an interpretation of puzzling writings including these lines: “Kafkas Texte sind die Beschreibung des Kampfes zwischen unversöhnlich gegensätzlichen Persönlichkeitsanteilen. [. . .] Kafka ist der Dichter der inneren Feindseligkeit” (89). Kafka’s first story—Rieck’s interpretive keystone—contains a description of battles and antipathy, but the warring parties involved are never precisely identified. Perhaps the reader should assume that the story explains that most or all of the world and its peoples live in a “Kafkaesque” environment of struggle and battle, whether psychological, spiritual, or physical.

Rieck shows us that the world of Kafka includes possibilities of games, including the games of literary analysis and applications of literary theories of different eras and schools of thought (Rieck makes considerable use of the theories of Freud) along with theatrical performances, criticism, varied derivative creations based on Kafka’s work, photographs, and artistic renderings called “descriptions.” A wide world is opened up to us that shows a large and ever-growing body of aesthetic and thought-provoking texts, films, and other forms of art or discourse identified by the fascinating label “Kafkaesque.”

Although it is difficult for me to completely embrace the statement, “Kafka

is nicht rätselhaft,” I find much of value in Gerhard Kieck’s comments and arguments about Kafka in this book, and I have little doubt that this would also be true of his previous three books about Franz Kafka and his literary creations.

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Helene Belndorfer, *Zollunion, Bankenkrise, Putschversuch: 1931 oder die Erste Republik zwischen den Schatten des Imperialen Österreich und Hitler ante portas*. Vienna: Böhlau, 2025. 642 pp.

This book is about a year of three failures—all of which, argues Helene Belndorfer, ultimately proved fatal to the First Austrian Republic. Usually, two other moments receive top billing in the downfall of interwar Austrian democracy: the “self-elimination” of Parliament declared by Chancellor Dollfuß in March 1933 and the February 1934 civil war. Belndorfer’s objective is to “search for the backgrounds and those responsible for the striking turn towards the abyss” (9). She locates these instead in 1931, “the last year of the First Republic of Austria in which Parliament still functioned as the legislature without being bypassed” (10). In quick succession, the Austrian government tried, unsuccessfully, to forge a customs union with Germany, bailed out the collapse of the Credit-Anstalt bank, and swiftly thwarted a coup attempted by right-wing paramilitaries led by Walter Pfrimer. It is through a comprehensive understanding of how people and institutions responded to—and shaped—the crises of 1931, Belndorfer contends, that the path to fascism’s eventual triumph becomes illuminated.

What makes this book unique is its methodology, which comes out of the Critical Discourse Analysis school. Belndorfer takes heavy inspiration from the Discourse-Historical Approach formulated by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, as well as from the Actor-Network Theory of Bruno Latour, *inter alia*. She is interested, above all, in demonstrating the simultaneous construction and interpretation of the crises of 1931 by centers of power, both political and discursive. Her goal is to let the contemporaries say for themselves what happenings constituted each of the three events, what was meaningful about them, and by what intellectual devices (tropes, allusions, attributions of causation, etc.) they should be apprehended. To this end, her source-base is exhaustive,