

**Kenneth Wain's: *K. The Letter Writer. Book one. Felice*, London, Cambridge,  
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**Peter Mayo  
University of Malta**

#### BETWIXT AUTHOR AND SPOUSE

This is a short review essay on Kenneth Wain's first published novel focusing around the life of Franz Kafka. Facts and fiction are intertwined in what is intended as the first of a trilogy on the subject.

Kenneth Wain, well known in his country and internationally for his philosophy, as a very productive, acclaimed academic and inspiring teacher over the years, and also, again in Malta, for his creative efforts in providing fine poetry and short stories in the English language, has just produced his first published novel. It consists of a fictional account of a tortuous and intermittent love affair between one of his obviously favourite authors, Franz Kafka and a person to whom the Czech author was engaged twice, Felice Bauer. Several obstacles stood in the way, most notably the struggle between the writer and the man who sought fulfilment, love and companionship. The latter entailed a strong and arguably crippling sense of moral responsibility. This, in turn, would have impinged on his ability to write and produce the aspired to literature for which he posthumously was revered. He was dissatisfied with much of this work. He charged his friend and literary agent, Max Brod with destroying the unpublished manuscripts. Brod, apparently without Kafka's knowing, preserved them for posterity. He is believed to have pieced disjointed parts together. The all-consuming struggle between two loves, that of writing and that for a woman, who though persevering in the relationship, had naturally strong moments of irritation, reaching breaking point, is well captured by Wain throughout. A strong sense of personal fragmentation by Kafka is felt all through the novel. One assumes this might continue in the second of an intended trilogy.

Kenneth Wain, as one would have expected, avails himself of Kafka's well known letters, especially those addressed to Felice, and evidently many other biographical and historical sources, all allowing for flights of the imagination. The result is a work of fiction, or 'faction', to borrow the now fashionable TV term. Born out of the author's curiosity about Kafka's life, notably the on and off relationship with Felice, the novel spans different settings, in Central Europe, including Germany and large swathes of what was once the Austro-Hungarian empire. In so doing, Wain conjures up imagined situations. Biographical notes and history are woven into an imaginative tapestry. The tension between the writer and the man seeking affection in everyday life is well teased out. Around this nodal point runs a series of fictitious episodes against a strong historical backdrop of events, events which reshaped Europe at the time.

The historical narrative, at the outset, of the Sarajevo assassination of the Archduke and his wife by Gavrilo Princep and his fellow Bosnian-Serb nationalists and similar episodes that triggered a chain of events were, in my opinion, among the most compelling parts, together with the episodes of anti-Jewish racism from which Kafka suffered. This is captured by such fictitious, but entirely plausible episodes attesting to the mounting anti-Semitism gripping Central Europe, including Kafka's Prague. The author latches on to Kafka's alleged frequenting of brothels in Prague, also hinted at by other writers, including Derek Sayer (2015) in his monumental *Prague. Capital of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A Surrealist History*. This highlights intriguing features of a complex male character. Most astonishing and riveting is the episode, I am told fictitious, when a prostitute chased him, a client, out of her bed on discovering that he was circumcised. This imagined feature of prostitution in Prague contrasts sharply with the more heroic image of sex workers, well documented, who are said to have spied on Nazi soldiers on behalf of the Czech resistance. This is also demonstrated in Sayer's historically grounded books on Czech culture and history. By the time the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia, Kafka, suffering from tuberculosis, the first symptoms of which are graphically revealed in the latter stages of the novel, had long since passed away. His sisters, including Kafka's favourite younger one, 'Otila', family abbreviation for Ottilie, given prominence in the narrative, were to perish during the Nazi occupation, murdered, with thousands of other Jews from Bohemia and Moravia, in the concentration camps.

Wain reveals his obviously long standing passion for and knowledge of Kafka's works by placing them, almost chronologically, in the narrative of *K. The Letter Writer* (this somehow recalls the name Josef K in Kafka's [2009a] *The Trial*) and describing their contents.

There are those who portray his father as partly responsible for knocking the self-esteem out of the young Kafka. One can detect a poor sense of self-worth in him, although he is depicted by his biographer to have been a flirt in his years as a young qualified lawyer, reluctant insurance agent and family business manager. His at times low self-esteem led to his frequently being identified with the repulsive creature in *The Metamorphosis* - feeling unable to communicate with others, including his next of kin. (Kafka, 2009b)

Kenneth Wain's writing, though kept simple throughout and flowing, is occasionally stilted. There also seems to be tension in Wain between the academic professor that he has been for several years and the novelist. This is reflected in the time he spends describing and discussing various works, including the intriguing *In The Penal Colony* (Kafka, 2014) - the episode of his particular reading of it in Munich underlines the complexity of Kafka's characterisation. This novella at times lent itself, elsewhere, to moralistic readings, though certainly not in this novel. The moral deductions included, as some have reported, inverted biblical interpretations. The critical exposition of works by Kafka brought out the erudite scholar in Wain, though this is quite understandable. Years of analytic academic writing and production cannot be shrugged aside easily. The same was said of a non-fiction book I published which was intended for a non-academic readership. To his credit, Wain used fiction to bring episodes to life, as, for instance, the anti-climax of Kafka's otherwise much anticipated re-encounter, in Budapest, with an actor and theatre director friend he revered. The man, Lowy, was down in the dumps, penniless and poorly, railing against everyone, including Kafka, for his gradual downward turn.

It is impressive that Wain conveys so much details about Prague, Berlin, Munich Marienbad, Vienna, Budapest and Arad without, to my knowledge, having lived for long stretches in any of these places. He might have been a meticulous note-taker and sharp observer during possible travels across any of these places. He might have alternatively accumulated copious notes from background bibliographic research. This is all conjecture. After all, several writers, including Kafka himself, wrote about places they never visited, let alone lived in, the greatest example being Shakespeare who often betrays a weird sense of geography. Derek Sayer (2000) takes a dig at the Bard with this title, *The Coasts of Bohemia. A Czech History* alluding to *The Winter's Tale* (Shakespeare, 2007). This echoes other ludicrous statements of this sort in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Shakespeare, 2006) and *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, 2015), to name but two. This does not, in any way, detract from the literary



merit of any work, nor should any proven geographical inaccuracy, if any, detract from Wain's.

All told, I learnt a lot from this book which makes me look forward to its sequel. There is much interweaving of biography, letters, tortured romance narrative, moral ruminations, cataclysmic historical events and geographical details across the central European territory. In addition, there is the sustained key nodal conflict, between the writer and the morally responsible, potentially timorous would-be husband. All these make for an engaging read.

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