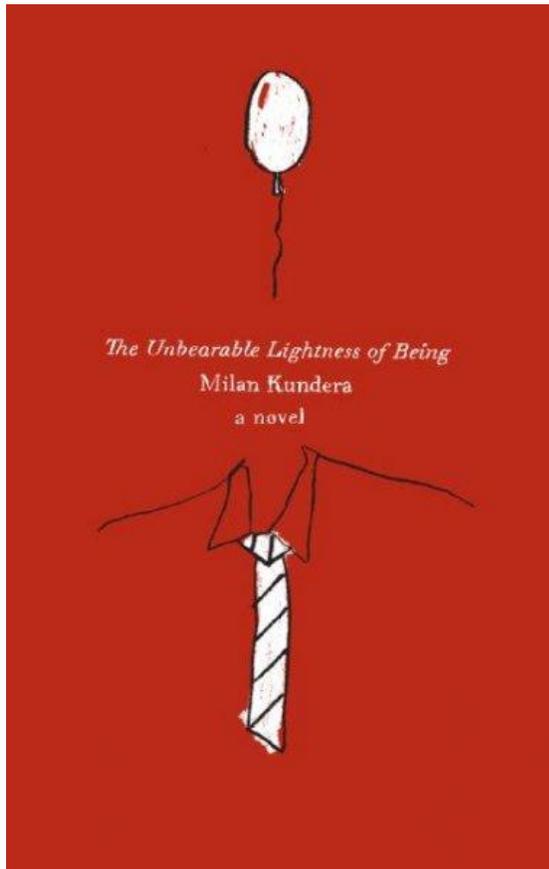


## About the book...



When *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was first published in English, it was hailed as "a work of the boldest mastery, originality, and richness" by critic Elizabeth Hardwick and named one of the best books of 1984 by the *New York Times Book Review*. It went on to win the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Fiction and quickly became an international bestseller. Twenty years later, the novel has established itself as a modern classic. To commemorate the anniversary of its first English-language publication, HarperCollins is proud to offer a special hardcover edition.

A young woman in love with a man torn between his love for her and his incorrigible womanizing; one of his mistresses and her humbly faithful lover -- these are the two couples whose story is told in this masterful novel.

Controlled by day, Tereza's jealousy awakens by night, transformed into ineffably sad death-dreams, while Tomas, a successful surgeon, alternates loving devotion to the dependent Tereza with the ardent pursuit of other women. Sabina, an independent, free-spirited artist, lives her life as a series of betrayals -- of parents, husband, country, love itself -- whereas her lover, the intellectual Franz, loses all because of his earnest goodness and fidelity.

In a world in which lives are shaped by irrevocable choices and by fortuitous events, a world in which everything occurs but once, existence seems to lose its substance, its weight. Hence we feel, says the novelist, "the unbearable lightness of being" -- not only as the consequence of our private acts but also in the public sphere, and the two inevitably intertwine.

This magnificent novel encompasses the extremes of comedy and tragedy, and embraces, it seems, all aspects of human existence. It juxtaposes geographically distant places (Prague, Geneva, Paris, Thailand, the United States, a forlorn Bohemian village); brilliant and playful reflections (on "eternal return," on kitsch, on man and animals -- Tomas and Tereza have a beloved doe named Karenin); and a variety of styles (from the farcical to the elegiac) to take its place as perhaps the major achievement of one of the world's truly great writers

### **About the author**



Milan Kundera

(Born April 1, 1929, Brno, Czech.) Czech-born French writer. He worked as a jazz musician and taught at Prague's film academy, but he gradually turned to writing. Though a member of the Communist Party for years, his works were banned after he participated in Czechoslovakia's short-lived liberalization movement (1967-68), and he was fired from his teaching positions. He immigrated to France in 1975 and was stripped of his Czech citizenship in 1979; he became a French citizen in 1981. His works combine erotic comedy with

political criticism. *The Joke* (1967), his first novel, describes life under Stalin. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), a series of wittily ironic meditations on the modern state, and the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984; film, 1988) were banned in his homeland until 1989. His later books include *Immortality* (1990) and *Slowness* (1994).

## **Awards**

Los Angeles Times Book Prizes for Fiction

## **Reviews**

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Like the much-praised (little-read?) *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980): another Kundera collage--part narrative, part speculative, combining erotic, political, and metaphysical elements. The philosophical frame is quite shifty this time, moving from notion to notion: consideration of the need for heaviness in existence (lack of weight equates with anomie, lovelessness, terror); kitsch; relations with animals; a theory of Paradise based on the denial of excrement. And, in these scattered sections, Kundera seems more often coy than profound, his apothegms usually verging on the

commonplace. ("A question with no answer is a barrier that cannot be breached. In other words, it is questions with no answers that set the limits of human possibility, describe the boundaries of human existence.") On the other hand, interest quickens whenever Kundera turns to his narrative: the plight of a disenfranchised Prague surgeon, Tomas, and his photographer-lover, Tereza-- mirrored by a Western couple, Swiss professor Franz and his painter-mistress, Sabina. Both couples are involved in oblique investigations of the spirituality and freedom of sex--as tested against the lack of spirit and freedom in the world at large. There's one powerfully touching, thoughtfully charged section rendering the death of Tomas and Tereza's old dog; the prose offers a few luminescent touches that are quintessential Kundera. ("Then he pulled off her panties and she was completely naked. When her soul saw her naked body in the arms of a stranger, it was so incredulous that it might as well have been watching the planet Mars at close range.") But, apart from these moments, the book generates little accumulating power: the oddness of its format requires great reader-patience--a patience that's rewarded only with evasive suggestion. And though Kundera's seriousness and natural grace are everywhere, they are finally beetled by the

feckless anemia of the collage/pastiche approach.

*The Wall Street Journal*

A work of large scale and complexity, symphonically arranged... political and philosophical, erotic and spiritual, funny and profound.... There is no wiser observer now writing of the multifarious relations of men and women.... Kundera's intelligence is both speculative and playful. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is his best novel yet.

*The Washington Post Book World*

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is both a love story and a novel of ideas.... Witty, seductive, serious... also full of feeling and enormously experienced in the tricky interplay of sex and politics.... One of the finest and most consistently interesting novelists in Europe or America, [Kundera] has a powerful tale to tell.

## **Literary Criticism**

Title: Critical Essay on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Author(s): Diane Andrews

Source: ***Novels for Students***. Ed. David A. Galens. Vol. 18. Detroit: Gale, 2003. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

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Full Text:

***The Unbearable Lightness of Being*** is a novel that functions on many different levels and consequently offers the scholar a host of literary theoretical positions to argue. The sheer number of ways the book has been read indicates this complexity. There are those who see it primarily as an exploration into the notion of love. Others see it as a dramatic account of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. It is also possible to read the novel as a philosophical study, starting with Kundera's fascination with Friedrich Nietzsche and Parmenides. Still other literary critics focus on the novel's structure in that it emulates a musical composition such as a fugue or symphony, with its introduction and reintroduction of themes and events. Finally, many scholars find the oppositions in the novel worthy of close attention.

How then should a reader approach *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*? Sabina's paintings and Tereza's photographs reveal that Kundera's intentions for his novel are probably irrelevant.

In his book *Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections*, John O'Brien chooses to develop yet another reading, one asserting that

Sabina's painting offers a clear alternative to oppositional thinking, and in this respect I believe Kundera presents Sabina's theory and practice of painting not only as a focal point of this novel, but also as a paradigm for understanding his work in general. Instead of reproducing surfaces that insist on a totalizing "intelligible lie," Kundera's novels, like Sabina's paintings, turn our attention to the deeper paradoxes, but . . . at the expense of the surface representations. In this insistence on and dramatization/staging of double vision, Kundera's novels do not just invite a deconstructionist perspective, but incorporate deconstructionist theory at the level of content.

Such a statement requires some unpacking. O'Brien's critical approach is to see Sabina's painting as metaphor for the entire structure of the novel. In so doing, he asserts that the novel is essentially "deconstructionist." Deconstruction is a critical theory that closely reads texts in order to demonstrate that texts do not generally mean what they appear to mean. In fact, deconstruction would argue that it is the nature of written language to both present and undermine "truth." Deconstructive writing often uses the device of

metafiction (or fiction about fiction itself) to call attention to itself as a piece of writing, as opposed to reality. While these concepts may seem complicated, looking carefully at how Kundera uses Sabina's paintings as a metaphor may shed light on both the novel and the theory.

Sabina finds her characteristic style by accident. As an artist in a socialist country, she is both expected and required to embody social realism in her work. As the narrator notes, "art that was not realistic was said to sap the foundations of socialism . . . she had painted in a style concealing the brush strokes and closely resembling color photography." One day, Sabina spills red paint on a picture of a building site. She tells Tereza,

At first I was terribly upset, but then I started enjoying it. The trickle looked like a crack; it turned the building site into a battered old backdrop, a backdrop with a building site painted on it. I began playing with the crack, filling it out, wondering what might be visible behind it. . . . On the surface, there was always an impeccably realistic world, but underneath, behind the backdrop's cracked canvas, lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract.

Sabina thus accidentally discovers the world behind the apparent world. While her paintings

look superficially realistic, and appear to be of building sites and steelworks, they are really about the life hidden behind this realistic facade.

Eva Le Grand, in *Kundera: Or the Memory of Desire*, offers an idea that may prove useful in this exploration. She suggests that Kundera follows an "aesthetic of the palimpsest." The word "palimpsest" is particularly apt. In the Middle Ages, because writing materials were so scarce, scribes would often wash the writing off a piece of parchment and use the parchment again and again. With new techniques of reading, contemporary scholars are able to read each level of the manuscript. Thus, while a manuscript will appear to be of a particular text, in reality there are many texts hidden behind the apparent one. Sabina's paintings then call to mind the notion of the palimpsest, the idea that there are other meanings hiding behind the apparent ones.

What Sabina accidentally discovers points to the essential problem of realistic representative art. It is dishonest in an insidious way. "Realistic" painting is not real; rather, it covers, hides, tricks the viewer through artifice to believe that what he or she sees is truth. For example, an artist will use the idea of perspective to create what seems to be a three-dimensional world. Thus, one object might appear to be farther away from the viewer than

another object. In reality, both objects are exactly the same distance from the viewer. Modernist painters rebelled against realistic art for just this reason. In a very famous painting (*The Treason of Pictures*), the artist Rene Magritte painted a picture of a pipe with the words below it, "This is not a pipe." At first, this seems silly to the viewer: of course it is a pipe! Anyone would recognize it as such. At second thought, however, the viewer must admit that, no, what he or she is seeing is a picture, not a pipe at all. Thus, even the most realistic of paintings hides a host of other possible meanings behind its surface.

If painting is unable to depict the truth, what then of photography? Does it not faithfully capture the moment, preserving what really happened in the past? Kundera also explores this question in ***The Unbearable Lightness of Being***, using Tereza's photography of the 1968 Soviet invasion as his example. He seems to be telling his reader that photographs *do* offer a way of revealing the truth of a situation. He writes,

All previous crimes of the Russian Empire had been committed under the cover of a discreet shadow. The deportation of a million Lithuanians, the murder of hundreds of thousands of Poles. . . . remain in our memory, but no photographic documentation exists; sooner or later they will

therefore be proclaimed as fabrications. Not so the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, of which both stills and motion pictures are stored in archives throughout the world.

Kundera continues by describing the bravery of the Czech photographers, and their awareness of their responsibility of preserving this moment for the future. Nevertheless, later in the book Kundera reveals that even photographs are much more complicated than they might first appear. They serve to cover complexity rather than reveal it. Many chapters after the invasion, Tereza realizes that photographs of the invasion are being used by the new repressive regime to identify the dissidents and thus provide evidence for their punishment. What this reveals is the irrelevance of intention in the creation of an image. The truth the Czech photographers intend to preserve is not the same truth the government derives from the photos. All the good intentions in the world cannot change the fact that these same photographs become the primary means through which people are betrayed.

How then should a reader approach ***The Unbearable Lightness of Being***? Sabina's paintings and Tereza's photographs reveal that Kundera's intentions for his novel are probably irrelevant. They also suggest that the smooth

surface of the love story hides and distorts what happens beneath that story. Like a drip of red paint, Kundera's authorial intrusions constantly remind readers that the book in front of them is a book, not reality.

It would be comforting to stop here, to simply acknowledge that Kundera is warning his audience to look past the superficial kitsch of culture to ask the essential questions of existence.

Deconstruction is not a comfortable theory, however, in that it reveals that all representation is just representation, not truth. In the case of ***The Unbearable Lightness of Being***, Kundera provides so many levels that the reader thinks he or she must finally have arrived at meaning, if nowhere else than in the authorial intrusion, in which Kundera speaks directly to the reader. But is this Kundera speaking to the reader? Or is it yet just another representation, a representation of Kundera written by Kundera nearly two decades ago? And what of Sabina's paintings? Certainly the reader believes that the world revealed in the crack is the truth. But again, even the world behind the surface of Sabina's paintings is still more representation. Even more unsettling is this: Sabina's paintings do not exist in reality, no matter how clearly the reader envisions them. The surface painting and the painting below the surface are not

paintings at all but black ink on white paper, words on the page, just as Magritte's pipe is not a pipe and Sabina's bowler hat is not a bowler hat. Kundera playfully reminds his reader with this enigmatic symbol that all representation is just representation, and, as it attempts to reveal, it necessarily conceals.

### **Source Citation**

Andrews, Diane. "Critical Essay on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*." *Novels for Students*. Ed. David A. Galens. Vol. 18. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 31 July 2011.

### **Discussion questions**

1. What kinds of being carry the attribute of lightness? How is the "lightness of being" of the novel's title presented? In what ways is it "unbearable"? What is the difference between "the sweet lightness of being" that Tomas enjoys in Zurich, after Tereza's return to Prague, and "the unbearable lightness of being"?

2. How does Nietzsche's myth of eternal return, with which Kundera opens his book, function in the novel? What does Kundera mean when he refers to "the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return"? How does what he calls the unbearable burden of

eternal return contrast with the "splendid lightness" of our daily lives?

3. How would you describe the three central relationships of the novel--Tereza and Tomas, Tomas and Sabina, Sabina and Franz? How do they embody Kundera's primary concerns and themes?

4. In what ways does Kundera explore what he calls "the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience." In what ways does he show this duality to be fundamental?

5. Both Tereza and Tomas repeatedly think of the series of fortuitous events that brought them together. What is the rule of fortuity, chance, and coincidence in their lives and the lives of others? What does Kundera mean when he writes, "Chance and chance alone has a message for us"?

6. In what ways may Sabina's description of her dual-level paintings--"On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth"--apply to every aspect of the characters' lives and relationships?

7. What meanings and importance do each of the main characters ascribe to fidelity and betrayal? In what instances, for each character, do fidelity and betrayal have either positive or negative qualities?

8. Kundera insists that "the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise." What visions or versions of paradise are presented in the novel? By whom? How does each vision/version of paradise affect the lives of its enthusiasts and the lives of others?

## **Multimedia**

"The Unbearable Lightness of Being" Available on DVD:

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1322547>

## **Read-Alikes**

*The Mark of the Angel* by Nancy Huston (1999)  
This novel details the relationship between Saffie, a young German girl working as a maid in post-World War II Paris, and her employer, a French musician named Raphael. Raphael is infatuated with Saffie, and eventually they marry and have a son. But when a Hungarian Jewish man named Andras enters their lives, everything changes. Tensions rise, and Saffie confronts her past and learns about the true meaning of love.

*The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugresi'c (2006)

Tanja Lucic was forced into exile from Yugoslavia. Now, she teaches Serbo-Croatian Literature at a university in Amsterdam. Her approach to teaching is unconventional because most of her students also are exiles from her country. She directs her students to write about their emotional pain and suffering living as an alien in a foreign culture. The class turns into a group therapy session when an international court tries a Serb leader for his policy of ethnic cleansing. Predictably, her methods are not appreciated by the university administration. However, when she tries conventional teaching, the results are unsatisfactory. Meanwhile, Tanja becomes sexually involved with a student with tragic consequences. Translated from the Croatian by Michael Henry Heim.

*One Man's Bible* by Gao Xingjian (2002)

Nobel Prize winner (2000) Gao Xingjian goes back to the Chinese Cultural Revolution for his second novel translated into English. The style is reminiscent of Milan Kundera's work, mixing politics and personal experience to paint a picture of an era. The story is a series of memories following an unnamed narrator through times that might best be described as right makes might and it is dangerous to be wrong. The narrator becomes a leader of the Red Guard and is sent to a reeducation camp because of an error his father

committed. He swings a transfer to the countryside and avoids execution. Interspersed with his political struggles the narrator describes his relationships with many women. Translated from the Chinese by Mable Lee.

**The Engineer of Human Souls** by Josef Skvorecky (1984)

A Czech writer teaching in a Toronto university corresponds with his boyhood friends and recalls the painful political experiences of his youth.

**The Master & Margarita** by Mikhail Bulgakov (1995)  
Set in Moscow of the 1920's, this satirical novel recounts the dealings a writer and his mistress have with Satan.

**Under the frog: a black comedy** by Tibor Fischer (1992)

Follows two young Hungarian basketball players, Pataki and Gyuri, from the last years of World War II through the anti-Soviet uprising of 1956, as they search for food, lodging, and female companionship.



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