

Kundera with his second wife, Věra Hrabánková.



A writer followed by his previous selves: Milan Kundera

The Czech writer Milan Kundera died in Paris on July 11 at the age of 94. Dr Jan Čulík, senior lecturer in Czech at Glasgow University, has written this assessment of his life and work.

Milan Kundera was one of the most important twentieth century Czech writers and was one of the few Czech writers who achieved wide international recognition. Kundera was regarded as an important author and intellectual from his early twenties in his native Czechoslovakia.

Each of his creative works and each of his contributions to the public, political and cultural discourse always provoked a lively debate in the context of its time.

In the first part of his creative career, Kundera was a Communist, although from the inception, his fellow-believers considered him to be an unorthodox thinker.

The story of his writing is a story of many Czech intellectuals of his generation: it is the story of freeing themselves of the Marxist dogma and of gaining and communicating important insights, based on the traumatic experience of life under totalitarianism in Central Europe.

Milan Kundera was born in Brno in the highly cultured middle class family of Ludvík Kundera (1891-1971), a pupil of the composer Leoš Janáček and an important Czech musicologist and pianist, the head of the Brno Musical Academy between 1948 and 1961.

From his early years, Kundera learnt to play the piano with his father. Later, he also studied musicology. Musicological influences can be found throughout Milan Kundera's work.

The author completed his secondary school studies in Brno in 1948. He then started studying literature and aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, but after two terms he transferred to the Film Academy, where he first attended lectures in film direction and then in script writing.

In 1950, he was temporarily forced to interrupt his studies for political reasons. After graduation in 1952 he was appointed as lecturer in world literature at the Film Academy.

In 1950 he and another Czech writer, Jan Trefulka, were expelled from the Communist

Party for "anti-party activities". Trefulka described the incident in his novella *Pršelo jim štěstí* (*Happiness rained on them*, 1962). Kundera used the incident as an inspiration for the main theme of his novel *Žert* (*The Joke*, 1967). Milan Kundera was re-admitted into the Communist Party in 1956. In 1970, he was expelled from the party for the second time.

Kundera later rejected and suppressed most of his literary output produced in the 1950s and the 1960s. He asserted the right of the author to exclude from his work "immature" and "unsuccessful" pieces of writing, the way composers do.

In his mature works of fiction, Kundera created an independent, self-contained world, which was constantly analysed and questioned from a philosophical point of view. However, it would be wrong to regard Kundera as a philosopher.

He was a proponent of no concrete school of thinking. He greatly enjoyed playing with his storylines and while analysing them rationally, he opened up an infinite way of interpreting the presented facts.

In concentrating on the sexual experiences of his characters, Kundera analysed the symbolic social meaning of these erotic encounters, thus being able to deal with the most essential themes concerning man.

Kundera's mature work is the result of his unique Central European experience of disillusionment with the left-wing mythology of Communism and also the product of his fascination with the West European literary tradition, manifested in the works of Rabelais, Diderot, Cervantes and Sterne, as well as with the Central European authors Kafka, Musil, Broch and Heidegger.

Kundera's journey to literary maturity was relatively long. In 1945, Kundera first published translations of poetry by the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in the journal *Gong* in Brno-Královo pole; in 1946, a surrealist poem by Milan Kundera, written undoubtedly under the influence of cousin Ludvík Kundera (born in 1920), a well-known Czech writer and poet in his own right, was printed in the journal *Mladé archy* (*The Young Notebooks*).

Milan Kundera's first book came out in 1953, five years after the Communist takeover of power in Czechoslovakia and dur-

ing the period of rampant Stalinism. It was a collection of lyrical poems, *Člověk zahrada širá* (*Man, a Wide Garden*, 1953).

The young author and many of his contemporaries saw this as an unorthodox departure from the poetics of literature which had been by this time fully enslaved by the orthodox Communist dogma.

In his first collection of poems, Kundera attempted to assume a critical attitude towards this type of "literature", but he still did so from a strictly Marxist point of view.

In 1955, Kundera published a blatant piece of Communist political propaganda, a long poem *Poslední máj* (*The Last May*), a homage to Julius Fučík, the hero of Communist resistance against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia during World War II.

The communist journalist Fučík is transformed into a mythical heroic figure in the poem. Some commentators have speculated that Kundera had been commissioned to write this propagandistic piece and did not really believe in what he was writing.

Monology (*Monologues*, first edition 1957) is a collection of poems in which Kundera highlights conflicts between lovers. Here he rejects political propaganda and again stresses the importance of natural, ordinary, authentic human experience. *Monology* is a book of love poetry of a rational, intellectual inspiration. Many poems are based on paradoxes. ("I cannot live with you, you are too beautiful.")

In this first stage of his creative career, Kundera also wrote plays. In *Majitelé klíčů* (*The Owners of the Keys*, 1962), which was very successfully staged in 1962 at the National Theatre in Prague by the experimental director Otomar Krejča, Kundera again attempted gently to humanise totalitarian Communism from within the framework of its own, official referential system.

From the middle of the 1950s, Kundera was a celebrity in Communist Czechoslovakia. He wrote for a number of literary magazines and his articles were followed with considerable interest. In 1955, his article *O sporech dědičských* (*Arguing about our inheritance*) stood up for the heritage of Czech and European avant-garde poetry, which until then had been condemned as decadent by official Communist literary scholars.

Equally well received was Kundera's literary study *Umění románu: Cesta Vladislava Vančury za velkou epikou* (*The Art of the Novel: Vladislav Vančura's journey to the great epic*, 1960).

This work, which analyses the writings of an outstanding Czech interwar avant garde prose writer (and member of the Communist party) Vladislav Vančura, is a strictly Marxist defence of experimentation in the field of narrative fiction.

The work was significantly influenced by the Hungarian Marxist theoretician György Lukács and his concept of the development of the epic – but writers were not allowed to quote Lukács in Czechoslovakia at that time.

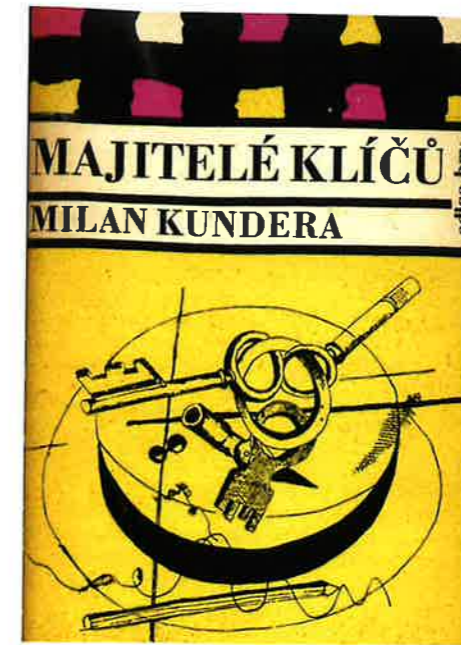
In the controversy that arose among Czech independent intellectuals about Kundera's novels, written in the 1980s (see the debate in the Prague samizdat monthly *Obsah* and the Czech emigré quarterly *Svědectví* in 1985-1988), some Czech writers criticised Kundera, once he had left for the West, for stylising himself into a role of a dissident writer, as though he had never been a Communist.

Thus, in an interview with Philip Roth, Milan Kundera says: "Then they expelled me from university. I lived among workmen. At that time, I played the trumpet in a jazz band in small-town cabarets. I played the piano and the trumpet. Then I wrote poetry. I painted. It was all nonsense. My first work which is worth while mentioning is a short story, written when I was thirty, the first story in the book *Laughable Loves*. This is when my life of a writer began. I had spent half of my life as a relatively unknown Czech intellectual."

Leading Czech literary critic Milan Jungman reacted to this as follows: "Those who used to know Milan Kundera in the 1950s and the 1960s, can hardly recognise him in this account. The self-portrait has been retouched in such a way that Kundera's real appearance has vanished. Everything essential that formed Kundera's image as a leading intellectual of the past few decades of Czech history has been suppressed."

In Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and the 1960s, Kundera was a major liberalising force in Czech official, Communist literature. Even after the publication of *Směšné lásky* (*Laughable Loves*) and *Žert*, which are seen by many as heralding an openly anti-totalitarian stage of Kundera's writing, in December 1968, four months after the Soviet invasion, in an article published in *Listy*, Kundera sees himself as a "person belonging to the world of socialism (i.e. Communism)" and criticises Václav Havel for using the arguments of a person who has never accepted Communist ideals.

Kundera looked back at the legacy of the 19th century Czech National Revival, at whose inception a handful of Czech intellectuals resurrected the Czech language as an instrument of educated discourse and brought the Czech nation from the threshold of extinction.



Kundera wrote plays in the early part of his career. Above: front cover of *Majitelé klíčů* (*The Owners of the Keys*), 1962.



Above: cover of *Žert*, (*The Joke*), first edition in Czech, 1967. Below: Faber & Faber English translation from 2016.

Faber Modern Classics

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The Joke MILAN KUNDERA



With an introduction by Robert McCrum

He referred to journalist Hubert Gordon Schauer, who in 1886 asked the re-established Czech national community whether all the effort recreating modern Czech national culture had been worth while. Would it not have been simpler and wiser had the Czechs merged with the larger and more sophisticated German community – he posited – rather than having to start from scratch in all the fields of human activity, in their own language?

Small nations always face the possibility of extinction, said Milan Kundera. There is no point in preserving a separate, Czech identity in the quickly integrating world if this community is incapable of making its own, innovative and unique contribution to mankind, in particular in the field of the arts.

In order to be able to do so, Czech literature and culture must develop in conditions of total freedom. Truth can only be reached in a dialogue conducted by individuals who are equal and free. Having experienced democracy, Nazi subjugation, Stalinism and "socialism", the Czechs are favourably placed to produce a unique testimony about man and his/her predicament, thus giving Czech culture meaning, maturity and greatness.

In the author's own words, Kundera's first mature period started in 1958 (or in 1959, he has given both years) when he "found himself as a writer" while working on his first short story, *Já, truchlivý Bůh* (*I, the mournful God*, 1958), which was later included in the first of the three slim volumes of *Směšné lásky* (*Laughable Loves*, 1963, 1965, 1968).

It was eventually left out from the definitive Czech edition of this book in 1981 because it was superfluous to the seven-part structure of the collection which Kundera imposed upon it. *Já, truchlivý Bůh* was written as relaxation during the hard work on the play *Majitelé klíčů*.

Like most of the texts in *Směšné lásky*, *Já, truchlivý Bůh*, is a brilliant miniature drama of intimate human relationships. Most of these short stories are based on bitter-sweet anecdotes which deal with the sexual relations of two or three characters.

Kundera believes that looking at people through the prism of erotic relationships reveals much about human nature. Thus he re-works the ancient Don Juan theme. The modern Don Juan, however, no longer conquers women. He just boringly collects them because the convention of the day demands this.

The play *Jakub a jeho pán* (*Jacques and his Master*, first published in a French translation in 1981, first published in the Czech original in Brno in 1992) was written in Prague in 1971, subsequent to the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968, after Kundera had become a non-person in his native country, along with more than 300 other writers.

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