



The Joke (Definitive Version)

By Milan Kundera

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All too often, this brilliant novel of thwarted love and revenge miscarried has been read for its political implications. Now, a quarter century after *The Joke* was first published and several years after the collapse of the Soviet-imposed Czechoslovak regime, it becomes easier to put such implications into perspective in favor of valuing the book (and all Kundera's work) as what it truly is: great, stirring literature that sheds new light on the eternal themes of human existence.

The present edition provides English-language readers an important further means toward reevaluation of *The Joke*. For reasons he describes in his Author's Note, Milan Kundera devoted much time to creating (with the assistance of his American publisher-editor) a completely revised translation that reflects his original as closely as any translation possibly can: reflects it in its fidelity not only to the words and syntax but also to the characteristic dictions and tonalities of the novel's narrators. The result is nothing less than the restoration of a classic.

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The Joke (Definitive Version) By Milan Kundera Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this new English-language version of Kundera's classic first novel, completely revised by the author to incorporate the most accurate portions of two previous translations plus his own corrections, the narrator Ludvik wonders, "What if History plays jokes?" This politically charged question, coupled with Ludvik's fate as an unintentional dissident, struck a chord in Czech readers; the novel's 1967 publication was a key literary event of the Prague Spring. Looking back on the tense, McCarthy-like atmosphere of the late 1940s, it chronicles the disastrous results of Ludvik's prankish postcard to a girlfriend criticizing the Czech communist regime. He is expelled from the Communist Party, forced to leave the university and join a special army unit with other enemies of the state. Years later, after he has resumed his studies and become a successful scientist, his lingering anger at the man who engineered his expulsion culminates in an act of destructive sexual revenge that serves only to show Ludvik he has never really understood any woman and is indeed the butt of one of history's many cruel jokes. The fresh descriptions and masterful employment of several narrators testify to Kundera's power as a novelist, unmistakable even in this early work.

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From Library Journal

This fifth English-language version of the ingenious first novel by the best-selling author of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (LJ 5/1/84) is based on Michael Henry Heim's translation (Harper & Row, 1984), which Kundera originally praised but found wanting after more careful review. The new version replaces words and phrases with more idiomatic or precise substitutes, occasionally recasting whole sentences. As a result, the narrators are better differentiated and the language more alive and natural, particularly in the reflective passages. The story of Ludvik Jahn's misfired joke, which ruins his life by giving him a reputation as an enemy of the state, and his equally misfired attempt at revenge (seduction of the wife of the Party official he holds responsible for his misfortune) is well worth reading--and purchasing--again in this definitive version fully revised by the author.

- Marie Bednar, *Pennsylvania State Univ. Libs., University Park*

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From Kirkus Reviews

Shades of the Rocky movies: This is English translation number five of Kundera's 1967 novel. The novel itself is one of the mordant fictions of Kundera's Czech-period--the story of a youthful jape made by a young man, Ludvik Jahn, a joke that escapes all proportions in the unnatural quiet of repression and fear of the tone-deaf state. In an odd way, it may be Kundera's most musical fiction, all about over- and under-tones. But the arrogant meanspiritedness Kundera exhibits here in his foreword about inaccuracies in Michael Henry Heim's 1982 Harper "retranslation" of the first American edition (1969 Coward McCann) amounts to not much more than a literary tantrum: "...In good conscience he [Heim] produced the kind of translation that one might call translation-adaptation (adaptation to the taste of the time and of the country for which it is intended, to the taste, in the final analysis, of the translator). Is this the current, normal practice? It's possible. But unacceptable. Unacceptable to me." So, Kundera tells us, he set to work on what we're now to take as the "definitive version": "On enlarged photocopies of the fourth version, I entered word-for-word translations of my original, either in English or in French, wherever I thought necessary...and soon I realized that...a new, fifth version was taking shape." What's this, the Dead Sea Scrolls? Translators, writers, readers, all can be offended by the authorial gracelessness, publishing astigmatism, and general waste of paper this amounts to. Buy someone's first novel instead. -- Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joaquin Hogan:

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Arthur Haase:

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Edna Kissel:

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Donald Burgess:

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