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A Hunger Artist

Franz Kafka (1883 – 1924)

Read by: Martin Reyto, Cori Samuel Language: English
 Length: 58 minutes Style: Solo
 Genre(s): Fiction, Short Fiction, Novella, Horror & Supernatural Fiction

Product Formats and Options				
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In the 19th and early 20th century there was a category of performers known as hunger artists or starvation artists. Almost always male, hunger artists traveled from town to town and performed public fasts that would last for up to 40 days while locked in cages, and were distinct from “living skeletons”, people with emaciated appearances who appeared in freak shows. Many people became aware of the practice from Franz Kafka’s 1922 story “*A Hunger Artist*”, in which the performer reckons with public reactions, which range from consolations to suspicions of cheating; with the impresario’s “perversions of the truth; and, finally, with a sudden and steep decline in popular taste for the act. He breaks with the promoter and joins a circus, only to

suffer from increasing neglect of both crowds and management. All this does not lead to a happy ending. The story captures the frequent Kafka themes of isolation, despair, angst, and alienation. While critics largely agree that the story is allegorical, they disagree about its meaning. Some see saintliness and asceticism; some see the classic story of the misunderstood artist. There is no disagreement, however, about Kafka’s masterful depiction of strange and unsettling states of mind.

Franz Kafka (July 3, 1883 – June 3, 1924) was an author best known for his works *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *In the Penal Colony*. He was born the eldest of six into a German-speaking Jewish family in the retail business in Prague, then the capitol of Bohemia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, later Czechoslovakia. He wrote in German in a culture that was dominantly Czech. He had a difficult relationship with his father, who was self-centered and overbearing, and, as his mother worked in the family business, he was raised with his sisters by governesses. He was educated as a lawyer and worked for an insurance company while writing in his spare time.

Few of Kafka’s works were published during his lifetime. His novels *The Trial* and *Amerika* were unfinished at his death and were published posthumously by his friend Max Brod. Kafka’s work is fraught with an angst that derives from the by-products of the rapidly modernizing world: profound alienation, physical and psychological brutality, bureaucratic labyrinths, and mysterious transmogrifications. As perhaps the first to master these themes, he is universally esteemed as one of the most influential authors of the 20th century.