Those who knew Kafka well felt he lived behind a "glass wall." He was there, smiling, kindly, a good listener, a faithful friend and yet, somehow, inaccessible. A jumble of complexes and neuroses, he managed to give the impression of distance, grace, serenity and, at times, even saintliness.

Kafka lived with his parents nearly all his life (even when he was financially independent and could have moved out), in very close quarters where his hyper-sensitivity to noise was put to the test on a daily basis. For Kafka Senior, a giant of a man, his son was a failure and a Schlemiel (good-for-nothing), a grave disappointment. He never hesitated to let him know.

His capacity for swallowing his fear of others and turning this against himself, rather than against its source is the stuff of all his work. Nowhere is the more apparent than in his relation to this man...

Hermann Kafka (1852-1931)
Kafka's lifelong awe in the face of superior power, made famous in the novels The Trial and The Castle, begins with Hermann Kafka. He feared and hated his teachers at school, but had to see them as "Respektspersonen," to be respected for no other reason than that they were in positions of authority.

But he never rebelled. Instead, he turned his fear into a self-abasement or psychosomatic illness. In every contretemps with authority, he made himself the guilty party. Moreover, as in the classical relationship between master and slave, between colonizer and colonized, he began to see himself through his father's eyes.
Samoa, a traveling salesman, was the family's provider. Because of him, his father had been able to retire, and his sister could expect to study the violin at the music conservatory.

For this reason, the first person to witness his change, along with his family, was the Chief Clerk of his firm, who had arrived because Gregor, for the first time in his life, was late for work.
In 1904, eight years before Franz Kafka wrote The Metamorphosis in Prague, across the ocean a cartoonist named Winsor McCay created "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend," a comic strip that appeared in New York's Evening Telegram. In each one-page installment a character was trapped in a world that grew more surreal with each panel—a gentleman's leg inflates and demolishes a mansion, a suitor's lover crumbles into confetti and blows away, a lady's alligator handbag morphs into a monster and devours her. Finally, in the last panel, the character awakens to reality, vowing never again to eat the nightmare-inducing rarebit cheese before bedtime.

Of course, Franz Kafka never allowed his characters to enjoy the relief of awakening to normalcy from their disturbing dreams. Still, the two artists had much in common, including a shared genius for rendering the anxious intersection of reality and dreamscape. Kafka may never have been a comic strip fan, but his angst-ridden characters in reality-bending scenarios are ideally suited to this medium. This adaptation of The Metamorphosis couldn't exist without Kafka's illuminating words, but owes a visual debt to McCay's transforming racism into the absurd darkness of slumland. I have drawn tremendous inspiration from both these pioneers, fascinated by their ability to address our human condition with unexpected twists, brilliant artistry, and dark humor.

Nearly a century later, the world of Kafka and McCay seem as fresh as if they were created to reflect our current anxieties. Kafka's tale of nightmare trials and monolithic bureaucracies feel no more surreal than headlines from our daily newspapers. It makes one wish that simply avoiding rarebit cheese were the remedy.

— Peter Kuper

Questions

1. What do the illustrations add to the details about Kafka's life? Which did you go to first—illustrations or written text? Why?

2. The graphic retelling of The Metamorphosis includes quotations from Kafka and illustrations but also summary (comments, which you will notice, Kuper does not include in his rendition, which follows). Are these helpful or distracting? Explain. Is it easy to determine which are directly from Kafka?

3. What do you think Mairowitz, who is accustomed to writing for scholarly audiences of his peers, hoped to accomplish with this collaboration with Crumb? Do you think it should add to or detract from his reputation in the academic world?

From The Metamorphosis

Peter Kuper

Peter Kuper (b. 1958) is an award-winning cartoonist and illustrator known for his social and political commentary. His illustrations appear regularly in numerous magazines, including Time, Newsweek, and Mad, for which he draws "Spy vs. Spy" every month. He graduated with a BA from Kent State University in Cleveland, Ohio, and studied at the Parsons School of Design and the Pratt Institute in New York City. His most recent books are graphic-novel adaptations of The Metamorphosis and Upton Sinclair's The Jungle. His wordless graphic novel Sticks and Stones was awarded the gold medal in the sequential arts category in the 2004 Society of Illustrators competition. In 2007, he published Stop Forgetting to Remember: The Autobiography of Walter Kurtz, a semi-autobiographical work on the struggle to balance being a husband, father, friend, and artist in the contemporary world.
When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from disturbing dreams, he found himself transformed...
How about if I go back to sleep for a bit and forget this prank...

But that was out of the question. Gregor was used to sleeping on his right side and in his present condition it was impossible to get into that position.

Day after day, it's the same story...

All the pressures of travel, worrying about train connections...

Eating miserable food on the run...

A parade of new faces, with no lasting relationships or greater intimacy...

Oh, Lord!

What an exhausting job I've chosen...

Being a traveling salesman.

TO HELL WITH IT ALL!
This getting up so early makes anyone function like an idiot...

A man needs his sleep!

Other traveling salesmen live like harem women. For instance, when I get back to the hotel to write up the orders I've taken that morning, these fellows are just sitting down to have breakfast.

If I tried pulling that with my boss, he'd fire me on the spot!

Ahh, if it weren't for my parents' predicament, I'd have quit long ago.

Especially given the disturbing way the boss sits high on his desk and talks down to his employees...

By now I would have marched into his office and given him a piece of my mind from the bottom of my heart!

That would have knocked him off his desk!
Ah, well, I haven’t given up all hope yet.

Once I’ve gotten the money to pay off my parents’ debt to him—in five or six years at most—I’ll certainly do it, then I’ll cut myself free!

In the meantime, I’d better get up if I’m to catch my 5 A.M. train ...

GOOD LORD!!

Could it be that somehow the alarm hadn’t gone off?

It was correctly set, that you could see.

Then it must have gone off!

Could he have slept peacefully through an ear-splitting ringing that made furniture shake?

So what should he do now?

The next train left at seven o’clock.

To catch that, he’d have to run like mad, and he wasn’t feeling particularly fresh...
What if he were to call in sick?

But that would be quite awkward and suspicious.

since Gregor had not been ill even once in the last five years on the job.

The boss would no doubt show up with a health-insurance doctor, and use his diagnosis to dismiss all excuses and blame Gregor’s parents for their son’s laziness!

Gregor, it’s a quarter to seven... Aren’t you planning to catch your train?

Gregor was shocked to hear his own voice, unmistakably his own, but with a horrible twittering squeak that garbled every word.

Yes, yes, Mother, I’m just getting up.
The change in Gregor’s voice must have been muffled by the wooden door because his mother was reassured and shuffled off. However, their little exchange made his father and sister aware that Gregor had not, as they assumed, left for work.

Gregor, it’s Grete, are you alright?
Do you need anything?

Please, Gregor, open the door.

But Gregor had no intention of unlocking the door and felt thankful for the habit he had acquired as a traveling salesman of bolting it at night, even when he was at home.

Certain that the change in his voice was merely the first sign of a bad cold, Gregor decided to get up, get dressed, and most important, have a good breakfast.

First he tried to arise by moving the lower part of his body...

But this proved to be too sensitive.

Then he tried moving his upper body...

But then he feared if he fell, it would take a miracle not to injure his head.

Back where he started, he lay there expecting, perhaps, everything would simply return to normal.
I can't just lie here being useless.

Before the clock strikes 7:15...

DING

I'll be up and out!

RING

It's someone from work, I'm certain!

Maybe no one will answer the door...

Good morning, madame, I'm looking for Gregor Samsa.

I'm the chief clerk at his... THUMP!
... he'd never have missed his train, but he's not feeling well.

Gregor, come out, the chief clerk is here to see you.

Herr Samsa, please open this door at once!

Herr Samsa, this behavior is shocking, SHOCKING! I must demand an immediate explanation!

I am astonished, ASTONISHED! I thought you were a reasonable person!

I had planned to say this in private, but you've given me no choice. On behalf of your employer I must tell you, your performance at work has been most unsatisfactory and your job is NOT at all secure.
Please sir, I just had a bit of a dizzy spell, but I'm fine now...

I should have mentioned I felt off yesterday. Never mind, I'm well now and I'll catch the eight o'clock train...

Do let the boss know and send my deepest apologies.

Did you understand a word he said? He sounded like an animal!

He's not trying to make fools of us, is he?

Grete! Grete! Fetch a locksmith at once!

My God! What if he's seriously ill? We should call a doctor!

No need for the locksmith after all!
Gregor knew if the manager left in this mood, it would seriously jeopardize his job.

His parents didn't understand this, they were too preoccupied with their own immediate troubles.

Where was his sister, Grete? She could have detained the man. He'd have listened to her!
Questions

1. How would you describe the illustrations? Are they humorous? frightening? exaggerated? realistic? Do they confirm or conflict with your interpretation of *The Metamorphosis*? Why do you think Kuper chose to illustrate in black and white rather than in color? Explain whether you think his choice was effective.

2. Even though Kuper uses Kafka's language, he does not include every word. Follow along closely for a few pages and comment on his selections. Has he chosen well? Do the illustrations make up for what he has left out?

3. Explain why you would or would not find it difficult to follow the plot if you had not already read Kafka.

4. Do you see the characters other than Gregor as caricatures, or are they developed through both visual and written text as fully as they are in Kafka's original? Explain your response with specific reference to the two texts.

5. Kuper employs different fonts to indicate the sound of voices. Explain why this is or is not effective in conveying character.

6. How does Kuper visually translate symbols from Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, such as the alarm clock, or doors or locks? Does the visual representation make these symbols more powerful or too obvious?

7. A fiction writer has many tools and strategies available to develop plot, character, and setting. After reading Kuper's *Metamorphosis*, which of these three do you think is most challenging for the graphic novelist to develop?

8. A reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune* described Kuper's book as "a fully realized effort meant to be read as literature, albeit a kind of literature we haven't seen before." Do you think it is literature? Explain.

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**PETER KUPER ON THE METAMORPHOSIS**

Renée Shea (RS): Why *The Metamorphosis*? Is it just a personal favorite of yours? Do you think it's especially powerful? The only other classic that you've done, as far as I can find, is *The Jungle*.

Peter Kuper (PK): *The Metamorphosis* seemed like a natural for comics. Kafka's imagery immediately gave me ideas for unusual ways of storytelling. His words acted as an anchor that allowed me to go wild visually while being grounded enough to not lose the reader. I had previously done a collection of nine of Kafka's short stories in a book called *Give It Up!* I found that his work translated so perfectly into comics that they seemed to draw themselves. *Metamorphosis* was the opportunity to do this kind of translation in a longer form.

RS: Why do you think Kafka's novella has weathered nearly a century so well? It's been a play, some film possibilities, now the novel — and it's remained required reading in high schools and colleges for decades. What's the lasting appeal?

PK: Feeling trapped by work, out of control, powerless, at odds with members of your family — who can't relate to that? It's about our human condition, and that isn't changing anytime soon. In fact, the world has only been getting more Kafkaesque.

RS: You've been very faithful to Kafka's text in your graphic retelling. Is changing the medium sufficiently creative for you? Did you have to resist changing details of the story?

PK: Yes, Kafka's inventions and the ground he covers gave me more than enough to work with. Transforming the text into a comic was already going pretty far; I wasn't looking to change anything — that would have been (even more) sacrilegious.

RS: That being said, the illustrations are themselves an interpretation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. What element(s) of your own interpretation — or, as you describe it, "adaptation" — do you think are most important in your graphic novel version?

PK: I wanted to maintain the humor in the story. It probably depends on your sense of humor whether you find anything funny about Kafka's stories; I think they are often hilarious. The three roomers that appear later in the story are one good example — they would be comfortable in a Marx Brothers film.

RS: You've written that Kafka's "angst-ridden character in reality-bending scenarios are ideally suited to this medium." Can you explain what you mean in more detail?

PK: In comics you can visually create a world, and the parameters can be stretched and bent and still feel like a reality. Although with CGI (computer-generated imagery), animated movies are blurring the line between what's real and what's drawn, this can be done seamlessly in a comic. You can create your own logic, and the surreal becomes reality. Kafka had already achieved this with his story; I used this as a springboard to demonstrate the possible ways a series of images can tell that story. Mine is only one interpretation. There are a million different ways his story could be told in comics.

RS: Your graphic novel captures the irony of Kafka and the dark humor, but it is not funny like your other adaptation of this story: "Metamorph Simpsons." What was your intent with this *Simpsons* take on Kafka? Is this
poking fun at Kafka's wide appeal (as if everyone knows the story), taking the satire in a more contemporary direction, devaluing it . . . ?

PK: This is one of the fundamental aspects of The Simpsons—taking sacred cows and serving them up as deliciously cooked humor. This is a lesson that Mad magazine taught so many of us and that led to shows like SNL and The Simpsons and the newspaper, the Onion. I'm just doing as I was taught by Alfred E. Neuman, and when the opportunity came up to do a Simpsons "Treehouse of Horror" story, Metamorphosis was a perfect sacred cow.

RS: In a letter to his publisher, Kafka expressed dismay about the original cover illustration and indicated that he did not want Gregor to be drawn. How do you respond to Kafka's concern?

PK: Kafka also told the executor of his will, Max Brod, to burn all of his unpublished manuscripts. I figured if his best friend could ignore him, I could do the same. Since I knew I was going to show Gregor on the inside of the book, I had already crossed Kafka's line. Actually, in my original cover design, I wanted to have the title printed on a translucent dust jacket (the paper cover that wraps around hardcover books), with the image of Gregor Samsa printed on the book itself. This way he would be out of focus; the only way you could see the bug was by lifting the dust jacket. This would have made the reader responsible for the unveiling. Unfortunately, like so many ideas, it was rejected because of cost.

RS: In a headnote to an interview, Michael Lorah described you as "undoubtedly the modern master whose work has refined the socially relevant comic to the highest point yet achieved." Why do you think Kafka's The Metamorphosis is "socially relevant" in the twenty-first century?

PK: Kafka's writing as a whole is incredibly relevant in our modern world. The term Kafkaesque is still regularly applied to acts by our politicians, our laws, and our daily experience with bureaucracies. The Metamorphosis is a great example of social critique.

RS: Do you think Gregor's is the quintessential adolescent consciousness? He hears people and he responds to them, but they don't understand. "Because no one could understand him, it didn't occur to anyone . . . that he could understand them . . . " His body's out of control, alien to him. His family is embarrassed, then repulsed, by him, can't accept him as he is; sounds like a teenager to me!

PK: Sounds like the teenage hell we all went through—some more than others, of course, but I personally felt Kafka would have been a good choice to write about my adolescent experience.

RS: My students and I don't always agree about the purpose of retellings, particularly the visual ones. My assumption is that graphic retellings are a step toward the original, perhaps meant to whet the appetite for the original work; my students disagree, claiming that these works have their own life—and purpose. (One called your graphic retelling "a celebration of Kafka.") But then what's the point? Is the audience for your Metamorphosis those who've read the original, those who will read the original after reading your graphic novel, or those whose understanding of Kafka will come exclusively from your adaptation?

PK: This can certainly be a problem, the same way that seeing a movie can replace people's desire to go out and read the book. Ideally everybody starts with the source material, and then they are in a position to judge how well the adaptation has done in capturing the original.

In the same way that music videos can get in the way of one's own images and associations with a song, I fear I may be guilty of this and hope the vengeful literary gods will pardon my intrusion. On the other hand, if someone who had never heard of Kafka came to his work through my adaptation, I may have helped someone discover Kafka's other writings. Having spent so many years working in an art form that has been considered "low art" only to be reevaluated as something higher, I find those distinctions to be faulty. Time has a way of adjusting these measures.

RS: Okay, I can't resist this one. David Foster Wallace writes about why students don't "get" Kafka's humor: "No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle." Do you agree with him?

PK: As I said earlier, whether you find Kafka's stories to be funny depends on your sense of humor. To me, the best humor has a dark edge. If people can laugh at the Onion's headlines about our modern horrors and what George Carlin had to say about the various ways we are doomed as a species, then Kafka isn't a stretch. It seems as if our times, for better and worse, are only going to produce more students who will find humor in the face of our waking nightmares. Sometimes that is the only way to survive.

Follow-Up

1. What elements or themes of Kafka's Metamorphosis are most important to Kuper?
2. Where does Kuper find humor in Kafka's Metamorphosis? How does he define that humor?
3. What do you think Kuper means when he describes comics as enabling artists to “create [their] own logic, and the surreal becomes reality” (para. 10)?

4. Does Kuper believe that his graphic novel will change how people read Kafka's *Metamorphosis*?

**Entering the Conversation**

As you develop a response to one of the following questions, refer to the texts you have read in this section. You may also draw on your own experience or knowledge relating to comics, Kafka, and *The Metamorphosis*.

1. Compare and contrast the first part of the original story by Kafka with Kuper’s graphic retelling. Kuper uses actual text from the story, yet his illustrations are themselves an interpretation. Explain which of Kafka’s ideas or themes Kuper emphasizes, as well as instances where he departs from Kafka’s intent.

2. Choosing one theme from *The Metamorphosis*, explain why you think it remains compelling for readers today. Then compare how Kafka’s treatment of this theme is similar to or different from the way another artist in this Conversation treats the same theme.

3. Who is the audience for these retellings? Explain why you think the audience consists of those who’ve already read Kafka, those who will be motivated to read Kafka, or those who will read only the retelling. Pay special attention to young readers of today. Consider Kuper’s graphic novel along with at least one of the other retellings.

4. Who is more sympathetic toward Gregor — Kafka, Mairowitz and Crumb, or Kuper? Consider the role of humor in the depictions. Be very specific in using references to the texts to support your interpretation.

5. In an essay entitled “Kafka and *The Metamorphosis*,” John Updike commented on why he felt that any visual representation of Gregor was doomed:

   Any theatrical or cinematic version of the story must founder on this point of external representation: A concrete image of the insect would be too distracting and shut off sympathy; such a version would lack the very heart of comedy and pathos which beats in the unsteady area between objective and subjective, where Gregor’s insect and human selves swayingly struggle. Still half-asleep, he notes his extraordinary condition yet persists in remembering and trying to fulfill his duties as a travelling salesman and the mainstay of this household. Later, relegated by the family to the shadows of a room turned storage closet, he responds to violin music and creeps forward, covered with dust and trailing remnants of food, to claim his sister’s love. Such scenes could not be done except with words. In this age that lives and dies by the visual, *The Metamorphosis* stands as a narrative

absolutely literary, able to exist only where language and the mind’s hazy wealth of imagery intersect.

Write an essay explaining what Updike’s position is and why you agree or disagree with it. Use several sources from the Conversation in your analysis.

6. Write an essay supporting, challenging, or modifying the claim made in the following quotation by Iris Bruce in her essay “Kafka and Popular Culture.” Refer to Kafka’s novella and at least two other texts in your analysis:

   Kafka’s writings are a good example of how iconic texts that used to belong to “high culture” can be “reborn” in popular culture in generically different formats... Kafka’s phenomenal rebirth is in itself a stunning metamorphosis. Here we have a writer who has successfully bridged the gap between high and popular culture, whose name is recognized by people who have never read one of his novels: the word “Kafkaesque” has entered into everyday speech and taken on iconic value. However, this success has come at a cost...; perhaps this is simply an example of capitalism’s endless ability to transform important ideas and images into “catchy” popular icons for the throng-hungry public. The unsettling and threatening possibilities inherent in the insect metaphor, for example, derive from deeply rooted anxieties, primal and contemporary at the same time; not incidentally, they also offer up new images for consumption in the insatiable cultural marketplace.

7. Write a dialogue between Franz Kafka and Peter Kuper. Imagine how Kafka would respond to Kuper’s graphic versions of *The Metamorphosis*. You may invent and create dialogue as well as quote from Kafka’s letter and the interview with Kuper.

8. Develop your own interpretation of *The Metamorphosis* using multimedia tools — audio, visual, or both. Explain why you made the choices you did.