



The Book of Imitation and Desire: Reading Milan Kundera with Rene Girard

Trevor Cribben Merrill

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Trevor Cribben Merrill offers a bold reassessment of Milan Kundera's place in the contemporary canon. Harold Bloom and others have dismissed the Franco-Czech author as a maker of "period pieces" that lost currency once the Berlin Wall fell. Merrill refutes this view, revealing a previously unexplored dimension of Kundera's fiction. Building on theorist René Girard's notion of "triangular desire," he shows that modern classics such as The Unbearable Lightness of Being and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting display a counterintuitive-and bitterly funny-understanding of human attraction.

Most works of fiction (and most movies, too) depict passionate feelings as deeply authentic and spontaneous. Kundera's novels and short stories overturn this romantic dogma. A pounding heart and sweaty palms could mean that we have found "the One" at last-or they could attest to the influence of a model whose desires we are unconsciously borrowing: our amorous predilections may owe less to personal taste or physical chemistry than they do to imitative desire.

At once a comprehensive survey of Kundera's novels and a witty introduction to Girard's mimetic theory, The Book of Imitation and Desire challenges our assumptions about human motive and renews our understanding of a major contemporary author.



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