



Kafka's House

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Ten-year-old Silvia Marcu lives in the magical world of fairy tales, sheltered from the traumatic events Romania goes through during the sixties. As the events of 1968 unfold, she is assailed by questions no one, not even her parents, can answer. With imagination and candor, Silvia embarks on a miraculous journey that reveals that the ordinary people around us hold the key to our most puzzling questions...

Kafka's House Details

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From Reader Review Kafka's House for online ebook

Robert Duperre says

Rating: 3.3 out of 5

I find it wonderful to read about a slice of life that is separate from my own, a sliver of reality alien to me in setting and social construction yet human enough to allow me to feel for the characters and wonder what it would be like if I, myself, lived under these circumstances.

In Kafka's House, Gabriela Popa transports the reader to Romania in the 1960's, a land where old ways are beginning to be ushered away at the onset of communism. In this tale we meet Sylvia, a precocious 10-year-old with a wandering mind, love of stories, and the unquenchable urge for knowledge apart from the everyday life she's always known.

The story is simple. Sylvia lives in a small town with her parents and younger sister, Mirela. She spends her time (both in school and out) with her best friend Duck and avoiding a young boy named Florin who she dubs "the enemy", the perpetrator of much of her youthful angst. She is constantly sent to pick up bors from a pair of older ladies down the street, Ana and Crina. Ana in particular captures Sylvia's attention, as she is a woman of travel. Ana tells the girl stories of Prague and lets Sylvia see postcards from other countries, as well as occasionally smuggling snippets of wonderment (in the form of pages from a diary) into her bags. Sylvia laps this all up and her thirst for adventure is only heightened.

The most brilliant aspect of the plot is that while her thirst is heightened, Sylvia is inexorably trapped by her everyday life. Her parents are overprotective and the simple truths of her country's conversion to a communist state and the ever-present threats from neighboring countries don't exactly make it safe or practical for this child to explore her inner voyager. So she spends much of the book trapped in her own mind, questioning the reasoning for what happens around her and using fairy tales to try and come to grips with what she doesn't understand.

Author Popa creates a Romania that is wonderfully unfamiliar and yet atmospheric. We the readers are transported to this land and by the end we come to at least a modicum of understanding of what life in this time, in this place, might have been like. She uses a delightfully innocent voice that gives the book the feel of being an autobiographical memoir rather than fictional tale, which this reviewer will go ahead and assume is done on purpose. With the intimacy with which Popa describes these people and their surroundings, this reviewer will go ahead and assume this is a story based directly on the author's life.

But this voice is also part of the problem with the book. Whereas the story is told through Sylvia's eyes and in the present tense, there are contemplations and language used that effectively pulled me out of the story every so often, for there is no way a sheltered girl of ten could be possessed of such worldliness. I wish the book had been written in past tense and constructed more in the way of a reflective memoir, because each time I was yanked from the wonderful atmosphere it canceled out what the writing is trying to accomplish.

The format and language used in the book was also a problem for me. Commas are abundant and often misused, words are constantly mashed together, grammar is spotty, and there are sporadic indents and spacing. Also, the author doesn't use quotes around dialogue, instead relying on an em-dash to connote someone speaking. Taken on its own this is a writing convention I don't necessarily mind (Cormac McCarthy doesn't use quotes either, and he's one of the greatest American writers of this century), but when

placed atop the other issues it becomes noticeable, distracting, and confusing. It gives the book a sometimes amateurish feel, and also makes one think that perhaps English is not the author's native language, which might well be true.

However, with all this being said and despite my rating, I can honestly say that I would recommend this book. It's a slice of youth and innocence that serves to inform us that no matter how different two cultures might be, in the end we're all human. We live, we learn, we encounter disappointment, pain, and fear, and yet still we may be able to rise above, even if it's through nothing but our imagination. You will wonder at the idiosyncrasies that people possess and ponder just how much of the unknown is unknown for a reason, for when faced with dire circumstances and a society living on the edge of fear, morality is sometimes hard to judge. I think that morality play, and the loss of your individual voice, may be the main points of the story, and for that alone I can say that I truly enjoyed the time I spent reading this.

Plot - 7

Characters - 9

Voice - 7

Execution - 3

Personal Enjoyment – 7

Overall – 33/50 (3.3/5)

Emma Jaye says

This book reads like an autobiography, in the same vein as *Cider With Rosie*, but from the perspective of a 10 year old Romanian child. It was quaint and interesting rather than the most gripping read I've ever had, but sometimes it's the little things that matter.

Life is hard by modern standards but Silvia and her friends make the best of it, because that's all they know. Even having grown up in a modern western country, the things Silvia is concerned about, school work, family, friends and childhood enemies, school trips and a healthy fantasy life resonated with me. The language is a little stilted, but rather than being annoying, it adds to the atmosphere of the story.

Elizabeth Cartwright says

Though generally outside the genres that I tend to gravitate towards, Gabriela Popa has found a great way of writing; a fantastic way of writing from the point of view of a child, while avoiding the annoyance of dealing with such an immature voice, but maintaining the innocence and simple naivety that you'd expect. While I fully expected to grow tired of a ten year old's point of view, I found myself surprisingly satisfied and endeared.

Through Popa's writing, she depicts for us life in the late 60s in Romania. Again, not something I'd have thought myself interested in, but interested I was. Parts feel so real, that I found myself forgetting Kafka's House isn't billed as a biography. It's fiction, it's an easy read, and it feels remarkably authentic.

Kafka's house describes 1968 Romania though the eyes of a ten year-old, it veers into the coming-of-age genre, and it describes a hard time in 10yo Sylvia's life. The story is full of hope even in a time that was so sad for so many, so much so, that you can't help but be a little disappointed when you don't find out the rest of Sylvia's story.

Jackie says

It is true that our childhood everyday experiences make us what we are-how we look at those experiences as we grow older gives us wisdom and knowledge- a great book to hel us remember and look back as to how we thought at a young age-smile

Melinda Brasher says

I love stories that take place in Europe. Having lived in Poland and the Czech Republic, both countries with communist pasts, I always find it interesting to hear different takes on the subject. In Kafka's House, we see life in Romania in the 60s through the eyes of an imaginative young girl. It's a charming read, but also enlightening.

There are a few little errors in grammar, mostly tense problems. There's also some odd word choice here and there, like "colleague" instead of "classmate," which probably comes from the Romanian coleg. None of this, however, interferes with the enjoyment of the book. In fact, it adds a bit of foreign flavor. A few phrases sound too modern, or too adult for the generally well-written kid's point of view, but overall it's a very good writing.

Parts of Kafka's House remind me of Little House on the Prairie or Anne of Green Gables, with a young main character full of wonder and intelligence, seeking to understand her world—which is different than ours.

I love the interesting fairy tales and folk tales worked beautifully into the story. The tragedies are touchingly told, and the part about the hole in the street is about more than just a hole in the street. There's a bit of repetition throughout, but not bad. Though I'd liked to have seen a little more about the political events toward the end, I learned a lot about the culture, and it made me want to research the history. This is one of the best things a book about that past can do.

Kafka's House is not an action-packed shoot-em-up, but it doesn't have to be. The individual characters and the interesting glimpse into a different culture are well worth the read.

Carla says

Thankfully, Gabriela gifted me a copy of this wonderful story. It was a good story that kept you reading. I enjoyed every minute of the telling of Silvia's childhood. I always love to learn about different cultures. Thank you, Gabriela! I would like to read more from you.

Grady says

Through a Child's Eyes

Gabriela Popa has discovered a transporting method of writing about the magic of being a child and seeing the world through the eyes of a child. In her words, 'A few years after I came to US, after a long discussion with my American friends about life in Eastern Europe, I started writing a novel about what meant to be a child in communist Romania. I wanted to understand the child I once was, because I felt that that child held the key to my future. I wanted to understand what it meant to grow up there in the mid-sixties. How were my friends, my schoolmates, how was I able to figure out what was happening around us? How did we distinguish between bad and good - when they were labeled chaotically? How was it that we laughed a lot, as children?' In *KAFKA'S HOUSE* Popa reveals a gift for writing that assures the reader from the first page that here is an artist who not only expresses herself well in a language that is so innocently childlike, but that she is about to give us all a view of how life in the Communist countries developed and influenced the thinking of the people - primarily through the developing eyes and thoughts of children who had not known life without dictatorship.

This is not a caustic novel, a book filled with disenchantment, a picture of a country degraded by the regime of Nicolae Ceau?escu. This story is more related to the universal tales of the spectrum of growing up in an environment restrictive by both governmental decree and by low income living no matter where the house and child and school and events of a year take place.

It would be difficult to imagine that the main character, the indefatigable Sylvia Cercu age 10, a little girl with a wild imagination, insisting on dreams coming true, curious enough to play at seeking God's assistance in gaining permission to attend a summer camp on the Black Sea in both an Orthodox Church and a Catholic Church, a little vixen unafraid to tease her fellow classmate Florin about his big banded ears as she is to try forbidden 'medicine' stolen by her best friend Duck and yet equally as able to perform her child duties such as fetching the ingredients for her mother's soup - it is difficult to think that there is not a lot of Gabriela Popa revealed.

So why the title of this book? It is as simply explained as is the day to day life in Bacau, Romania and yet echoes the wisdom of the writer: Franz Kafka (1883 -1924) was a German-language writer of novels and short stories, born in Prague, whose themes included alienation, physical and psychological brutality, parent-child conflict, characters on a terrifying quest, and mystical transformations. We discover from Sylvia that Kafka lived in a tiny 'restrictive' house in exotic Prague - a parallel in many ways, though on the level of a child, to Sylvia's existence. It is that sort of multiple levels of meaning that makes this little book so memorable. Originality of writing, depth of intelligence, and freshness of voice - these are the attributes of Gabriela Popa.

Grady Harp

Ted Farrar says

THOUGHT-PROVOKING AND EVOCATIVE

Kafka's House is a snapshot of 10-year-old Silvia's life in rural Romania under the Communist regime. Maybe it's partly autobiographical – I don't know, but the characters are lovingly realistic and well-developed. I don't think I'm spoiling anything by saying that nothing much happens. Don't expect magical revelations, epic quests or heroic defiance. What you will get is a poignant understanding of ordinary people struggling to cope under the paranoid social repression of Communism.

This is a difficult book for me to review because it's so far outside my comfort zone, so I'll try to be as objective as I can. First, the story, written in first person present point of view. I tried writing from this point of view once and it made my brain hurt really bad and I gave up. Some people say they find this POV very taxing to read, yet Gabriela somehow accomplishes it effortlessly.

Second, the writing. Gabriela's prose is simple on the eye and at times childlike in delivery, in keeping with her protagonist. Sometimes her prose reads like poetry, but this is entirely in keeping with the spirit of the book and is never pretentious. Her dialogue is a delight, and I often found myself chuckling.

Thirdly - was it really 200-odd pages? Must've been good!

When I finished the book and closed the cover I thought I'd put it out of my mind. That was two days ago, and yet the story stays with me. What better recommendation can a reader give, than that this author has the power to make one feel?

Jade Onyx says

Gabriela Popa's writing is refreshingly beautiful, achingly universal, and somewhat spiritual. Popa writes this story from 10-year-old Sylvia Marcu's perspective about childhood in communist Romania in the 60s on the eve of change. Popa's personal experience informs this fictionalized historical novel.

Through the eyes of a child, we see what the child deems as important--what the freedoms and limitations of daily life are. In no way does the author draw sympathy from the reader, forcing us to see how communism may have robbed the children of their childhood. Instead, what Popa allows us to do through Sylvia is see the kindness, compassion, confusion, exploration, dreams and choices we have outside the box.

"Outside the box" describes Kafka's house. Franz Kafka is a real person, a German-language fiction author from the late 1800s, early 1900s. When Sylvia visits this writer's abode, she realizes that the fantastical stories that Kafka wrote transcended his tiny home. In that way, she relates to him. That gem of wisdom is what I took from this book: We are only limited by our boxes--the ones we carry around in our heads. As authors, no one can unpack this box but us. We are responsible for delivering our work.

Gabriela Popa delivered. Needless to say, I highly recommend this work.
No, I won't say more or else I would spoil it for you.

Jennie Goutet says

This book was enchanting to read. The narrative is from the point of view of a child growing up in communist Romania, and her joys and concerns are as unique to the time and place as they are universal to all children everywhere. It's a stunning read. I highly recommend this book.

Sandy says

very easy read, good for all ages. Gabriela writes in such a way that the reader can 'see' what the characters are seeing. You almost feel as if you are there walking with 10 year old Sylvia and experiencing her life as she does. So glad to have the opportunity to read this book.

Al says

Near the beginning, when eight-year old Silvia Marcu, the protagonist and narrator of "Kafka's House," is introducing herself to the reader she mentions that people who live in small houses make her uneasy. She then relates this to how she felt years later when she visited the house in Prague where Franz Kafka once lived. This house, while extremely small, is also where Kafka wrote much of his work. Silvia says, "I was stunned to see how someone with such vast inner spaces can live in such a ridiculously small house."

If there is an overriding theme to "Kafka's House," it is while someone might be restricted in many ways it is still possible to have an enjoyable and full life by focusing on those areas that are unrestricted. Romania in the 1960s was very restrictive. The country was communist, with the constraints that implies. The Soviets were invading neighboring Czechoslovakia, which created more stress and less freedom as they prepared for the possibility of war. Silvia's house, while larger than Kafka's, was still small and crowded with Silvia, her parents, and sister living in a two-room apartment. Yet, Silvia had a zest for life and all it had to offer.

I found the book enjoyable, not only for the story, but for the glimpse it gave of growing up in a different country and culture. The differences are revealing, yet I found the similarities show almost as much. Kids interact with each other in the same way, regardless of country. They worry about schoolwork. They love to play and are sharp observers of the world around them as they seek to understand that world and their place in it. Some experiences truly are universal.

Originally written for "Books and Pals" book blog.

Rick Skwiot says

An intimate and affecting view of 1968 Romania, at the time of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, through the eyes of Silvia Marcu, a dreamy and imaginative 10-year-old learning about death, disappointment and informants in a totalitarian society.

Yet for all that -- and despite Silvia's frugal, circumscribed life -- the book has a warmth, humor and wisdom that elevate it above mere politics. Of particular appeal, too, is the look inside Romanian homes, families and

lives as people were forced to adapt to grim realities. Her father adapts by drinking wine and plum brandy; a neighbor lady dreams of traveling to Prague; Silvia dreams of going to summer camp on the Black Sea.

But we also get to see the reality -- what they eat, how they travel, their folktales, their idioms, and daily life both in town and in the countryside. We also witness how they deal with a bureaucracy indifferent (as are most all bureaucracies) to personal wants. The reader glimpses, too, Silvia's ongoing struggles with the multiplication tables -- including her visualizing the number seven as seven dwarfs hopping from one ladder of the multiplication table to another, as a means of finally enjoying math.

This is a charming novel.

Bonnie Ferrante says

When I started this book, I wasn't sure I would like it. Told from the point of view of a 10-year-old Romanian girl named Silvia in 1968, the story takes a few pages to pull you in. But once it has you, it doesn't let go.

Silvia deals with all the normal things of childhood, school, friends, learning the times table, wanting to have things her family can't afford, and puzzlement at the behavior of adults. Her family is struggling, not as poor as the relatives on the farm, but unsure whether they can grant Silvia's wish to spend two weeks at a seaside camp.

Confused by the political scene and the vulnerability of anyone who speaks out against the government, Silvia soon realizes that her parents, and other adults, are even more fearful and unsure of what the future brings. Enemies are no longer clearly marked by such childish things as sticking out ears. Even the sweet old lady who sells bors for the family stew can't be trusted.

Gabriela Popa's characters are complex and memorable. Not only does Silvia wrap around our hearts, but her innocent little sister who is transformed by the chance to wear a paper crown, her mother who wants more than anything to grant Silvia's wish to go to the beach, and her father who must now wear a soldier's uniform he does not want, become important and real to the reader.

Symbolism and metaphor are lightly scattered throughout the book. Popa's writing is subtly poetic. When the community expresses anger that a large hole has been left in the street risking the safety of children, no one is able to do anything about it. Inevitably, a little boy is killed. Still the hole remains open. This is a microcosm of life for the powerless people of Romania.

My only complaint about this book is that I wish it had been longer. I was given a free copy of this book for review.

Abby Vandiver says

4 1/2

Kafka's House tell the story of a little girl living in Romania during the 1960. The story is well-written and

ahs a feel to it that draws you back to when you were young. Playing outside, dealing with the neighborhood residents, young, old, mean, suspicious. In that, it is a very warm, and relaxing tale.

i wasn't sure if this was non-fiction, or fiction based on real events. That tells a lot about the writing ability of the author. Popa is a very good writer, and weaves a well-crafted, well-written book. I enjoyed very much the characters. Each was distinct with their own voice, believable, and predictable, but only because you came to know them through the story. The book is written more as a collection of events during the year that Silvia is ten.

I felt that the voice of Silvia, written in first person, was not that of a ten year old, but someone older. The child's words and thoughts were much more mature than a ten year old's, as well as that of the three year old sister, who attended kindergarten and spoke as if she was five or six. And although that it less believable for me, it didn't make the story any less enjoyable. Communism was not a central theme in the story but seeped in at times. Kafka's House while mentioned briefly in the story, made me wonder why the book was so named.

I enjoyed reading this book, and I really enjoyed Popa's writing. I would definitely read another book by this author. I'd recommend this to everyone.
