

5. WRITER WRONG?

In 1924, dying of tuberculosis in a Viennese sanatorium, Franz Kafka wrote to his lifelong friend, Max Brod, and instructed him that when he, Kafka, died, Brod should destroy all of Kafka's unpublished writings. Brod did not comply with Kafka's wishes. Instead he released the manuscripts for unpublished novels--The Trial, The Castle, and Amerika--works that firmly established Kafka as one of the foremost European writers of the twentieth century. Brod also retained about 40,000 pages of other writings, which he passed on to his secretary, Esther Hoffe. When she died, at the age of 101, her daughters inherited the unpublished writings, and kept their contents a deep secret. Recently, after a protracted court battle between the state of Israel and Hoffe's daughters, Israel gained access to these writings. Israel plans to make the writings public.

Kafka's situation is not the first time great literature was rescued from oblivion by a disobedient executor. Virgil was still polishing the Aeneid at the time of his death in 19 BCE. Tradition has it that he became ill and left instructions that the manuscript be destroyed. Augustus Caesar ordered the instructions be ignored, and the Aeneid was published with minor editorial corrections. It became, and has remained, a central work in the Western canon. The Aeneid is often acclaimed as the pinnacle of Latin literature.

Some authors, of course, have succeeded in such end-of-life housecleaning. Willa Cather died before completing a novel, *Hard Punishments*. Her editor and friend of thirty years, Edith Lewis, destroyed the unfinished manuscript, as per Cather's instructions. Nicolai Gogol didn't trust the task to anyone else, but burned the manuscript of a sequel to *Dead Souls*. Many people feel the world to be worse off for these losses.

Vladimir Nabokov's last work, *The Original of Laura*, was unfinished when the author died in 1977. He left strict instructions to destroy the manuscript, rather than publish it in its imperfect state. After 30 years of wavering over what to do, his son, Dmitri, released it for publication. Pre-publication hype suggested the book might be "the literary event of 2009," but the critics did not receive it well, finding it fragmentary and puzzling. While Nabokov scholarship has benefitted, the larger literary public may not have.

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