



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

By 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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### Editorial Review

#### Review

The contribution that Trevor Merrill's book makes is at least threefold: it sheds new light on the work of one of our era's strongest novelists; it extends and confirms the literary reach of Rene Girard's main hypotheses; and it helps us to better understand our own existence. And it does all of this in a style that's clear, precise, and elegant. What more could be asked of a major work of literary criticism? -- Francois Ricard, McGill University, USA

In the same way that according to Galileo "Nature's great book is written in mathematical language", Trevor Merrill argues brilliantly that Milan Kundera's oeuvre is written in terms of Rene Girard's theory of mimetic, triangular desire. What is remarkable is that Kundera himself was unaware of the existence of the theory when he wrote his first novels. Had he been, he would by his own admission have found himself unable to write them. What is even more remarkable is that this structural kinship once revealed does add to the beauty of Kundera's works in the same way that Newton's or Einstein's equations make Nature even more astounding. This is a great book about a great writer and a great theory, in which the three vertices of the triangle enhance one another. -- Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Professor of Philosophy, Ecole Polytechnique, Paris, France

With clear and persuasive style Trevor Cribben Merrill's *The Book of Imitation and Desire* successfully rescues Milan Kundera from the unjust expulsion he suffered, at the hand of Harold Bloom, from the pantheon of the 20th century canonic authors. By compellingly arguing about the infinite perceptiveness of Kundera's novels in relation to the Quixotesque adventures of our eternally mediated desires, Merrill offers an illuminating and enriching new perspective on the opus of the Czech writer. The Girardian lens, rather than straitjacketing the psychological complexity of Kundera's works, as many have argued, opens up new critical perspectives and a new understanding of the author of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Pace Bloom, in the pantheon of the novelistic geniuses set by Girard's seminal *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Merrill's excellent book suggests, a place should now be reserved for Milan Kundera. -- Pierpaolo Antonello, University Senior Lecturer, Department of Italian, University of Cambridge, UK

#### About the Author

Trevor Cribben Merrill is Lecturer in French at the California Institute of Technology and sits on the Research Committee of *Imitatio: Integrating the Human Sciences*. He studied literature at Yale University and the Ecole Normale Supérieure and went on to receive his doctorate in French Studies from UCLA, USA, where he was a Chancellor's Fellow. A two-time fellow of the Association Recherches Mimétiques in Paris, he has co-edited a book of essays by René Girard and collaborated on *Psychopolitics* (Michigan State University Press, 2012), a dialogue with psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian.

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#### Agnes Higa:

This *The Book of Imitation and Desire: Reading Milan Kundera with Rene Girard* book is not really ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you have by reading this book is actually information inside this publication incredible fresh, you will get data which is getting deeper an individual read a lot of information you will get. This specific *The Book of Imitation and Desire: Reading Milan Kundera with Rene Girard* without we comprehend teach the one who studying it become critical in

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