

## **My favourite book: Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis***

Fraser Ayres

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is one of those precious and timeless works that speak specifically yet universally, drawing upon themes and issues that will be with humanity for as long as we walk this earth: identity, family and kinship, loyalty, aspirations of greatness and the perils of inactivity.

*Metamorphosis* was written in 1912 in Prague and tells the tale of Gregor Samsa who begins to transform into a 'bug', much to the abject horror of his conservative parents and his sister.

As his physical form develops and his behaviour becomes altered, he reflects on his life as a salesman and its value, to not only himself, but society. Happy to leave that life behind, he begins to find a happiness, and his sister, for a time, attempts to look after him, in some way attempting to understand what it is that her brother has become.

What appears to be a body shock-horror tale is so much richer and many have discussed its social implications, or whether it is a tale of Kafka's feelings towards his own distant father. For me, it is something very different.

Gregor does indeed change, but as we get to the end of the story and we realise it is framed from the family's perspective, not Gregor's, we begin to understand that perhaps Gregor wasn't a 'bug' after all, and perhaps it was how he was perceived by those outside of himself, those that defined who and what he was and got to decide whether it was good or bad.

I have read and reread multiple versions of *Metamorphosis* (and even had a crack at the original German!) but it was only relatively recently I fully understood why it has resonated so powerfully with me over the years; it's probably worth mentioning at this point that I'm mixed race. The identity of a person of mixed heritage is entirely defined by the observer, in a way that those of darker or lighter hues don't experience. A black man is never 'mistaken' for a white guy, a white woman is never 'taken' for a black woman. Mixed-race individuals are treated in ways based on the individual observer's own prejudices and assumptions – both positive and negative. I think of my poor white mum, as I blared out hip hop in my teens as a way to tap into and understand my own identity, as I became like Gregor 'the bug'...

Thankfully, my home life was a wonderful, safe environment and my dear mum took great pleasure in helping to facilitate wherever my personal discoveries led me, be it my identity or my career or my faith; she was always on my side.

I do wonder what would have happened had Gregor had that support? Had his family decided to facilitate his transition and had his sister offered the ultimate kindness instead of the ultimate betrayal?

Perhaps after 'the bug', there was something else? For surely our own metamorphosis is an ongoing process, and never ever a finalised event. What might that story have been?

### **Fraser Ayres**

Fraser is an award-winning actor/writer/director as well as CEO and founder of the TriForce Creative Network and [dandi.org.uk](http://dandi.org.uk); an organisation set up in 2003 with a core ethos of 'inclusivity' that promotes equal opportunities in the entertainment industry.

He is mixed race (Barbadian/Scottish), born and raised in Leicester, from a single parent, working-class family. This very much informs all his work on and off-screen.

Fraser is responsible for creating the only comedy panel show about Black history, *'Sorry, I Didn't Know'*, and his writing includes *In the Long Run*, *Eastenders*, and *Lagging*, alongside radio productions such as *Maynard* for BBC Radio 4 (receiving the 2021 Imison Award) and *Space is the Place*, a five- part dramatization of the lives of the jazz greats for Jazz FM.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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