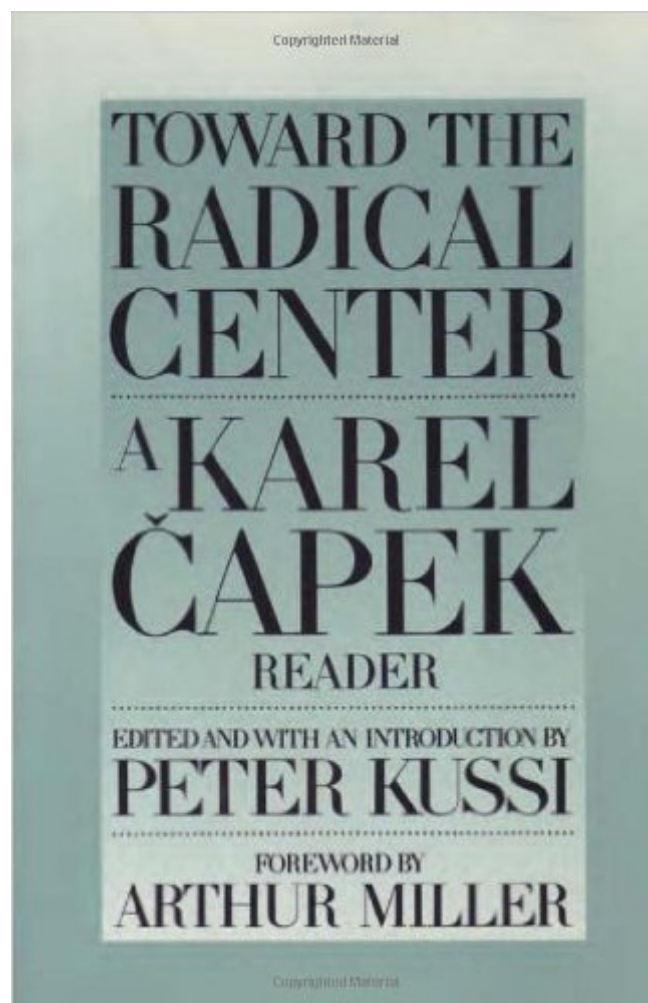


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Toward The Radical Center: A Karel Capek Reader



Synopsis

Capek's best plays, stories, and columns take us from the social contributions of clumsy people to dramatic meditations on mortality and commitment. The Reader includes a new and, at last, complete English translation of R.U.R., the play that introduced the literary robot.

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Customer Reviews

Outside his native Czechoslovakia the author Karel Capek (to be pronounced as: Chah-pek) is not as well known as he would merit. In fact, he is one of the 20th century's greatest authors, with a masterful talent for sharp observation and profound reflexion. This collection - [Towards the radical center](#) - contains, inter alia, his two most famous theater plays: 1. [Rossums Universal Robots](#), which was written in 1920, introduced the word [Robot](#) (Czech for the forced labour of serfs) into practically all modern languages, in the sense of an automaton that without protest performs all the chores humans themselves are loath to do themselves. In his play Capek underlines that the process of creating a class of intelligent servile automatons inevitably leads to cruelty. In the end the robots revolt against human oppression. 2. [The Makropoulos Affair](#). A central theme in this theater play is that of a youth elixir that provides eternal life. It turns out that, in the very long run, this is more a curse than a blessing. Apart from these two famous plays, the selection contains a number of essays and short stories which, without exception, are very witty and profound. Every cat lover should read his brilliant one page essay [From the point of view of a cat](#). In 1936,

appalled by the threat of expanding Nazism, Capek elaborated the main theme of *Rossums Universal Robots* in an even grander way in his novel *War with the Newts*. This novel - which is not included within this selection but separately available on - is an anti-utopian (dystopian) novel at least as unsettling as Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*. Not having read Capek means missing a vital part of 20th century world literature. Capek died soon after the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in 1938.

I found this book (along with other Capek masterpieces) while casually browsing in a Prague bookstore. In short, this book is for anyone who may have heard of Karel Capek and wants to know what exactly makes his fans so captivated about this sadly underrated writer. Containing the full *Makropoulos Affair* and *RUR* (the Robot play) scripts as well as numerous shorter articles, stories and anecdotes that leaves one thirsting for more, *Toward the Radical Centre* offers a nigh complete overview of Capek's opus, clearly demonstrating the man's worldview, which combines a profound commitment to individual freedom and dignity, vigorous resistance to all forms of extremism (whether fascist, socialist AND capitalist) and a deep sensibility to the oft unexpressed facets and quirks of human nature. Capek is the perfect antidote for those trying to make sense of the absurdities of man and is as relevant in today's age of extremes (rabid capitalism, fundamentalist explosions etc) as it was in the 1930s.

Karel Capek may have won the 1936 Nobel Prize in literature, were it not for his implicitly and at often times explicitly anti-totalitarian views. It is an unspoken truth that the Swedish Nobel Academy feared Hitler's growing regime as much as anybody in Europe... Instead, Mr. Capek died a heartbroken man in 1938, a few months after Britain's Chamberlain handed the writer's beloved Czechoslovakia over to Hitler, in exchange for "peace in Europe." Germany invaded Poland a few months later... Karel Capek was amongst Europe's greatest writers and playwrights during the period between WWI and WWII. His love of mankind and all living creatures is legendary. Few people have ever written with such eloquence, or insight, about matters of eternal significance. It should also be noted that his anti-Utopian play "R.U.R.," which gave birth to the only Czech word in the English language (robot), was offered to the world 9 years before Aldous Huxley's somewhat analogous 1932 "Brave New World." The collection of plays, essays and short stories under review is exceptional. It gives the reader a most enjoyable and poignant introduction to the heart and soul of the Czech people, through the wisdom of their most honorable representative. Arthur Miller's

foreword also is a masterpiece...

Capek was a genius and an all-around literateur, succeeding with fairytales, novels, plays, and sketches. He could even draw. (and he liked cats, which endears him to me). A Czech friend first got me interested in Capek, and made me read WAR OF THE NEWTS, one of his novels, which I adored. WAR OF THE NEWTS is part of this series. This reader is certainly a good addition to any library, particularly for anyone interested in Capek's work or Czech writing in the Golden Age (the first Republic, before Chamberlain's bargain with Hitler carved up the new state of Czechoslovakia). However, the translations here do not do Capek justice. While the translation of the play R.U.R. (a play which introduced the word "robot" to the English language, and which was once more heavily anthologized and taught in America than O'Neill) does include scenes that were cut from the Broadway productions of 1921 and 1945, scenes never before available in English, the translator also takes idiomatic Czech and makes it oddly formal, stilted. "To staci" for example is translated as "That will suffice," which is literally the meaning, but doesn't capture the informality of the phrase. "That's enough" would have been more speakable. If you're a director, use this text only for research but don't give it to your actors-- it will bore an audience, and lacks Capek's humor and zest. And some of the translation, according to native speakers, is simply inaccurate (a word that can mean "scissors" in context was translated as "provisions.") Just as poetry should really only be translated by a poet, plays should really only be translated by playwrights (working with native speakers if necessary). Too much is lost. Still, the book does put in English, however flawed, much that had been long out of print, and all of it is worth reading.

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