

Reading Guide for Insect Dreams: The Half Life of Gregor Samsa by Marc Estrin

About the Book

A six foot talking cockroach with an ethical agenda can make quite an impression along the way -- as did Gregor Samsa, escaped from Prague, and let loose upon the New World -- our world. Marc Estrin's sweeping novel follows him as he learns his trade, and bring his wisdom to bear on key movers and moments of our recent past. From a Viennese sideshow, to the streets of New York, to FDR's White House, to the Manhattan Project, Gregor's thoughts and efforts will remain part of the history of human and insect striving for a new and better options.

About the Author

At sixteen, Marc Estrin lost his reading virginity to Franz Kafka. In graduate school, hoping to improve the universe, he organized a book-burning of *The Trial*, but succeeded only in melting a hole in his floor varnish, and bringing the Fire Department, which didn't quite understand the project.

Reading Group Discussion Themes

Choosing and investigating a theme is both a magnifying glass and a pie-slicer, enabling a reader to dissect the intricacies of a work. Major themes running throughout *Insect Dreams* include

- The vision and treatment of "the Other" -- as freak, as threat, as conceptual colleague. Parenthetically, how has our conception of "the Other" changed after September 11th?
- What are "freaks"? Who are "freaks"?
- Making things better: the gift -- and also poison -- of Rationality and Science.
- The function and practice of self-sacrifice in society.
- The politics of Politics.
- Internal cultural imperialism: how does a culture colonize itself?
- The uses of performance to illuminate.
- The how and why of Love.
- The dominions of Death.
- Fiction in bed with facts: Is it kosher for FDR to shake hands with a roach?

Each member of a Reading Group might choose to focus on and present a report on one of these themes. The sum of such reports will deepen understanding of the book.

An Exemplary Examination of Insect Dreams

GREGOR SAMSA'S DREAM OF LIFE AND DEATH
a meditation by the author's Perfect Reader

*O lord, grant to each his own death,
the dying which truly evolves from this life
in which he found love, meaning and distress.*
Rilke

Gregor's Six-Legged Suicide

At some point -- it's hard to say exactly when -- perhaps after the St. Louis affair, perhaps after Yoshio Miyaguchi's self-immolation -- Gregor Samsa began to hear the ticking of his own death's clock, and experience a sense of solitude closing in around him. It was then that his path took on its final trajectory, step by step, trustingly, towards that great invisible border. It was not a surrender, not a simple succumbing to fate, but a conscious act of submission, taken in hand, and made his own. Carl Jung claimed that "the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being." Gregor had lit a light that shone even through the immense candlepower of the bomb. While most suicides tend to make death superficial, an act like any other, something to do, Gregor's relationship to death was more exact, a Musil-like combination of "precision and soul", empowering the absence of power -- as if in ruptured nothingness there might emerge some luminous power of affirmation.

It seems to me that Gregor's act had six distinct strands.

1. Despair. All suicide has some component of despair. It may be common personal despondency -- a failed love affair, the death of a loved one, the shrinking of one's prospects to zero -- or it may be higher level despair -- the samurai's noble seppuku, the saint's martyrdom in remissionem peccatorum. Gregor's was the latter. Jew and alien both, he was hypersensitive to any mistreatment of "The Other". While his own life might be deemed "successful", the life of a professional operating in the highest circles of power, he remained acutely aware of the plight of the afflicted: the racism -- hooded and bareheaded both -- of his adoptive homeland; the depredations of the rich upon the poor; the incarceration of innocent Japanese; and most critically the German treatment of Jews, gypsies and "deviants" during the war, and the utter insensitivity of his own Administration in addressing it. If man is wolf to man, it was always "the Other" that was the preferred food. The final blow, of course, was his colleagues' lust to continue working, though the bomb's *raison d'être* was no more, and the decision to drop it, without warning, on unarmed civilians. I'm glad he did not live to see the results.

2. Guilt. As sensitive, self-critical, even self-doubting as Gregor was, there was also, as is common, a component of guilt. He knew it was "silly". He sometimes called it "stupid". But he also knew that without his thigmotactic suggestions, Neddermeyer might never have hit upon the implosion strategy, and the whole project might have foundered -- completely, or at least long enough for the war to have been less violently ended, and history to have been slightly less malevolent. His guilt may have been irrational, but irrationality is part of being human.

3. Buddhist Thinking. My suspicion is that the letter from the dying Amadeus was a short course in Buddhism for Gregor, the analogue to young Prince Siddhartha's encounter with old age, sickness and death. Not that he hadn't understood these issues intellectually before: he was not a student of Spengler for nothing. But Amadeus' communication from Berlin, read under FDR's bedroom couch -- an evocative venue -- contrasted so ironically with the Christmas Carol being sung that it burrowed its way into a deeper level of Gregor's being, prompted a step back from his engagement with the

world, and a concomitant semi-withdrawal from ego, per se. His subsequent encounter with Miyaguchi, and the flames of that hero's departure, seared the pattern into his flesh, as it were, and may have served as a model, or at least a spur to his greenhorn Buddhist thinking.

4. Oppie/Schopenhauer/Hinduism was another clear strand, an Ariadne thread out of the maze. That individual death was a mere manifestation of the Veil of Maya; that he, even in his chitinous shell, was Brahman, the universe; that extinction yielded the gift of The Whole -- surely this made easier a course which others might have feared to tread. Fool and angel both, Gregor walked it lightly on his six legs.

5. Related to that strand is **the two-pronged dimension of love, Agape and Eros**. For some, the latter must diminish the former. Yet Gregor was innocent enough of erotic bounty to largely escape its toll. Alice was his one love, his one experience of human physical affection, and their one night together was a medium-size slice of the pie of his guilt. But unlike implosion-guilt, it was a slice he would not have done without. Its bittersweet softness coated many rougher elements of his life with a velvety, nostalgic glaze: he was glad he had met and loved, however sad the outcome. And as one cannot love others without loving oneself, so too one cannot love self -- enough to renounce it -- without having loved others. The Alice affair was Eros' contribution. Of Agape there was no lack. It was "implicit in the project".

6. The sixth strand is for me the most problematic. For Gregor, there was a distinct messianic dimension to his mission: "to help save humanity from being so bestial," he once put it. He didn't see himself as being *the* Messiah, of course, but simply as aiding in *tikkun*, the healing, repair, and transformation of the world, the redemption of God's creation on earth. The goal of any nice Jewish boy. But being a German-speaking, depth-seeking European, he was also alive to Aryan myths: Parsifal, Amfortas, the Grail, the Waste Land, the meaning of the Unhealing Wound. And he did feel that the unfortunate hole in his back was symbolic, was more than symbolic, that it was a sign, a setting-apart, and even a source of power. What could the wound do? It could somehow -- illogically -- "heal the Waste Land and make it bloom again," and in this thought he found his pride. I find here what little there was of his arrogance.

To me the whole idea is patently ridiculous. The transpersonal dimension of his self-sacrifice was humble, but still megalomaniacal. What possible healing connection could there be between the admittedly magnificent symbol of his death, and its dreadful real-world context? A transpersonal dimension to suicide is vanity no matter where or when or how, a self-imposed, self-deluded struggle one is bound to lose. Gregor's embrace of such primitive thinking led him to imagine that the force of life can only be maintained by the suppression of life -- Rite of Spring revisited. Nonsense. The idea also led him to his only act of dissimulation: his presentation to Oppenheimer that last night was far from honest, was even baldly manipulative. Seizing on Oppie's interest in the *Gita*, Gregor made it seem as if he were applying for discipleship to that work, an early initiate, yearning to take a large step along the path of Enlightenment. Actually, he simply wanted his boss to get him past the guards. Can you imagine Oppie's reaction had Gregor said, "I

want to commit suicide under the tower in order to help save the world”? The brig -- that’s what it would have been. The psychiatric service, then the brig -- without his keys or belt.

There is a Jewish/Platonic level at which I can understand, and even approve of, Gregor's transpersonal goal: he once spoke of what he called “the mission of Noah”, his desire to become an “intimate and pure ark of all things, a refuge in which they might take shelter, and where they are not content to be as they are -- narrow, shopworn, trapped in life -- but where they might be transformed, preserved from themselves, intact.” He believed it could be. So? So what difference did it make to General Groves, or Richard Nixon, or Ronald Reagan or William Jefferson Clinton? Or to the kids in South Central, or the dead babies in Iraq? Et cetera. I won’t go into it. As the good Doctor Williams Carlos Williams whispered on his deathbed, his last words of wisdom, “You know, there are a lotta bastards out there.” And what, moreover, had Gregor to offer in this task of salvation? Only his aptitude for termination, his fragility, his exhaustion, his gift for death.

Enough. This too-long, too-emotional critique of strand six threatens to overwhelm reality: the truth was that I found his act enthralling and admirable. Gregor had answered a call to die more profoundly, dreaming perhaps of continuing -- inside death -- the movement of metamorphosis.

The Hours in the Trench

What must it have been like to lie there between 11 and 5:30, nuzzled among wires and instruments, five hours of listening to the rain, followed by an hour and a half of listening to -- nothing? Here I can only conjecture. At least three themes suggest themselves:

1. Dust unto dust.

Gregor used this expression often in the last months of his life, slipped it into discussions that were at first glance inappropriate, but on further reflection provided odd resonance. It was not God into which he plunged. Given his messianic ambitions, Gregor’s inward movement was preparation for some manifestation in the *world*, faithful to the fullness of earthly existence. Gregor, Mr. Thigmotaxis, was most sensitive to the loving embrace of his environment. And what was the main feature of this high desert? Dust. In spite of the torrential rains of his last night, his pit must have been dry. There was too much sensitive equipment in there for it’s roof to have been fashioned otherwise. For all the downpour, he had entrusted himself to dust, dry dust, the hot summer dust of the Valley of the Dry Bones. A talmudic voyager, he knew well Ezekiel 37: “there was a noise and behold a shaking, and the bones came together bone to his bone.” I am certain that along with his vision of coming-apart, there was a strong expectation of putting-together, of rebirth, atomic matter still conserved, dust to greater dust, Dasein to be found again at the pure center of the excessive. After all, this suicide was not a typical act of night, but a patient act of morning.

2. Chrysalis.

It can hardly escape the reader that Gregor's descent into the pit before his ultimate transformation smells of insect metamorphosis. Though the word is somewhat ragged by now, a thought which rarely occurs is that the change so well described by Kafka was only the first of a series of polymorphic changes, growing instars evolving toward some radiant end.

I say "toward". But as with all life cycles, there is really no beginning or end. Perhaps, as the schoolgirls suggested, Gregor the fabric salesman was only the roach's way of making a more profound roach. Or vice versa. Remember Chuang-Tsu's question: "Am I a man dreaming I am a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I am a man?"

Most insects have stretch receptors that fire neurohormones when the exoskeleton is pushed beyond capacity. Did Gregor have moral or spiritual stretch receptors which prompted some eccentric molt? What went on physiognomically in those six and a half hours? If beauty is directly proportional to truth, perhaps on that last night he developed splendid wings, wings like those of a giant Atlas moth. We will never know. "It is the mark and nature of significant truth to stay hidden," Heidegger observes, "though radiant in and through this occlusion." The darkness of night is surer than the light of day.

3. The Animal and the Open.

Of this theme I am most certain. It is not the night, it is what haunts the night that frightens -- and humans are haunted by many things. But here we must recall that Gregor was not entirely human. Why was he so attracted by Rilke's Eighth Duino Elegy? Why did he make it the mainstay of his 1918 circus presentations? I refer the reader back to Chapter Three, and Gregor's performance of "*With all its eyes the creature-world beholds the open.*"

Dr. Johnson once quipped that "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man." He did not advertise the compensations. Rilke felt that the animal's consciousness put it at great ontological advantage, permitting it to enter into reality without having to be its center. He intuited the consequent sense of inner space -- not the inside dimension of any individual being, but the *Weltinnenraum*, the world's inner space, easily perceived by animals, and only with great difficulty by humans.

*Through all beings spreads the one space:
the world's inner space. Silently fly the birds
all through us.*

Why is it so hard for us? Why is the human so cut off from the interiority of the exterior, that extension within, where "the infinite penetrates so intimately that it is as though the shining stars rested lightly in his breast"?

*What is outside, we know from the animal's face
alone; for while a child's quite small we take it
and turn it round and force it to look backwards*

*at conformation and not into that Open,
so profound in the animal's face...*

Just as dog can smell what we cannot, and eagle see more sharply, so was Gregor superior to us in his perception of the Open, the vast space of the *Weltinnenraum*. Not only could he see farther and more deeply, even with myopic vision, but his eyes, like our ears, were always open. Without eyelids, he could not leave anything out of himself, withhold himself from any being, or reject any thought -- a further dimension of the Open. Gregor's was a life of infinite relations, in a place unbarred to newness -- the experience of the Open.

But even an animal "whose Being is infinite for it, inconceivable, unreflective," even an animal which, "where we see the future, sees everything, and sees itself in everything and safe forever" -- sometimes that animal too bears "the weight and the care of a great sadness,"

*For that which often overwhelms us clings
to him as well, -- a kind of memory
that what we're pressing after now was once
nearer and truer and attached to us
with infinite tenderness.*

Gregor quoted these lines many times, harking back to his Vienna days, or surfing the sorrows from then to now. Yet out there in the desert night, in the darkness of the gash, waiting for the infinite blow, I am certain he embraced the Open, and was embraced in return, happy at last. This I know, even in the dryness of my bones.

The Logic of Gregor's Path

I think back on my own life: from high school to college to graduate school to post-doctoral work to assistant, associate, and full professorship, a predictable, linear train of academic events, interesting in its way, but compared to Gregor's, profoundly boring. His path looks more like Brownian motion, poor particle Gregor buffeted by random events, punched, kicked and shoved this way and that by a world fraught with explosions. Yet in retrospect, how fiercely determined it seems, as if guided by an inner logic more flowery, yet more iron-clad than my own, toward an inevitable destination: Ground Zero.

I think of his Vienna encounter with Robert Musil, that bitter, brilliant writer/engineer, combining in himself the strengths and perils of spirit and science, seizing on Gregor as an embodiment of the "Other Condition", secretly attending his talks, and finally articulating for him his role as possibilitarian. Could Gregor have done this himself? Would he not have simply dissolved into the stew of Otherness simmering in Amadeus' Wonderkitchen? Musil demanded he find a doorway to the world beyond limited existence. How fitting that interview ended with a telegram announcing the coming of Roöntgen-of-the-skeletal-hand.

And Wittgenstein. What impertinent author-God would cast the greatest mind in twentieth century philosophy as a fourth-grade schoolteacher in a dung-covered village north of Vienna? Yet there he was, in time to raise the question “What does it mean to be human?”. And there Gregor was for him, planting the seed of his last and greatest work, his investigations of the limits of rational thought. And there, too, was Punch the Jude -- already and again.

If Alice had no other function in his life (and of course she had many), her poignant encounter with Gregor brought him briefly into the gravitational field of Dr. Max Lindhorst, with his exposition of Eros and Thanatos, and the consequences of Faustian hubris. Forewarned, but four-armed, Gregor left his session with this practitioner with more resolve, direction, and self-understanding.

A chance meeting at Yankee Stadium, a job on 43rd Street right near Town Hall, an offer of free tickets to the first performance of Ives’ Fourth Symphony: it seemed destined that Gregor would meet up with his guru, his tutor for the New World, that crusty New England maniac-genius of music and insurance, Charles Ives. Was Gregor to remain an elevator boy all his life? How else could he have come to explore risk -- to the point where he was fearless in its face? And he was there for Charlie -- one insect calling another -- strong and beautiful -- out of the table.

Ives was also Gregor’s introduction to the concept of Hogmind, and the rage and struggle it could conjure. Yet far from counseling revenge and scorn, *The Insect Sonata*, Ives’ grateful gift to Gregor, urged the place of Love in “man’s right constitution”:

*Always preceding power,
And with much power, always, always much more love.*

Gregor took this priority with him into battle.

I have spoken at length of the sequence of Gregor's disillusionments: the refugees, the Japanese, the completion and deployment of the bomb. But along with these major events, there were minor details which debrided his surface, as it were, and enabled such traumas to penetrate more deeply. The betrayal of Philoctetes, for instance, and the suppurating wound it left. His tears at the Time Capsule. The six-character calligraphy. The strange appearance of the Leiermann in Lafayette Park.

Leo Szilard once remarked that Gregor was the most stimulating person he had ever known, and the only one of his many friends and enemies he would have liked to emulate. I was taken aback. I had never thought of Gregor as stimulating. Inspiring, surely, in his low-key way, but -- until the end -- gentle to a fault. As for emulating him, well, let’s just say he was unique.

Tilano was another huge guard rail on Gregor’s path. His gift of a petroglyph New World ancestor preserved in volcanic tuff was one of the few experiences Gregor thought of as “mystical”. He was my teacher as well. I interviewed him on his 85th birthday in 1955,

just before his death, ten years after the bomb. This was what he told me. I imagine he must have shared similar thoughts with Gregor:

Anglos want that which in the nature of things is impossible. They believe that there must be a man who is more manly than a good man can be, and that there is a beautiful woman who is more beautiful than all the other beautiful women. They really think that everything and every people, except us, can be whatever they would like it to be....They are never contented because they are always looking for a happiness which is greater than happiness. They want to find love where they have sown only hate and selfishness. They want to run and never tire, to satisfy all their thirsts and hungers and not be full. They cannot see that the sickness which they all suffer comes from greed, a kind of childish believing that when they close down their minds, the world is not what it always was and always what it will be.

Transcribing this from my old tape recorder, I cried.

Gregor as Jewish

In assessing his life, I have spoken of the need to recall that Gregor was an animal. Though I approach the subject with some hesitation, one cannot avoid acknowledging, too, that Gregor was a Jew. What is a Jew? Herein lies my concern: I hesitate to characterize a group that has so often and so recently been characterized -- to death.

Judaism and its children, Christianity and Islam, have long stood against much of the world with respect to the atom. The Hindus were atomists, the Arabs were atomists, affirming the eternity of matter and the recurrence of creation. And in the later Mediterranean, when most westerners believed the world to be ruled by a pantheon of gods with extraordinary powers but strangely human weaknesses, a handful of Hellenic thinkers called for a rational view involving only natural causes and effects, without invoking transcendent powers. God was set aside.

Not so! cried Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The world was created once, in its perfection, ex nihilo. Biblical doctrine remains at odds with all theory: for Hebrew anti-atomists, "God created..." was enough, truth was frozen, origins explained; there was no further need to question. Judaism is the only great religion to have produced not a single defender of atomism, at least until modern times.

Now this is a questionable achievement on a resumé for Los Alamos. Not that it wasn't shared by many of the crew. But they were scientists. Or soldiers. They had other things to think about, large problems that could distract them from larger issues. It would be safe to say that Gregor was the only non-scientist, non-military, philosophical possibilitarian on the mesa. Similar to his animal sense of the Open, his free-playing Judaism endowed him with extra sensibility with which to judge the goings-on.

Gregor once invoked his Jewish privilege, and gave his personal definition of a Jew. It was the only time anyone ever heard him "tell a joke". This was his joke:

It is May, 1940, at a refugee center in Paris, just before the Nazi occupation. The nice woman at the desk is trying to sort out transport requests. She asks a Belgian refugee where she and her children would like to go. "London. I have family." She is marked for London. Next she asks a French communist. "Sweden would be best," he says, "we can organize from there." Finally she asks an old Jew in black gabardine. "New Zealand," he mutters. "New Zealand?" she asks, "Why so far?" The Jew looks at her and says, "Far from what?"

Not exactly a side-splitter. But it will do.

Jewish Oppenheimer and Hindu Science

Oppie was similarly schizophrenic -- if not worse. For he was not only a Jew, but a Hindu Jew. This was the man who was both father and midwife to the bomb, the man who rode his team through every difficulty and objection. This was the man who named his horse "Crisis". Yet this was the man who also said, "If atomic bombs were to be added as new weapons to the armaments of a warring world, then the time will come when mankind will curse the name of Los Alamos."

Such a statement was a great surprise to the men who, under him, and with his encouragement, were striving to create just such weapons. Yet to a student of the Vaisheshika Sutra, this thought would not seem strange. The atomic theory of Vaisheshika conforms with tenets of Brahminical doctrine -- a cyclical cosmos, a multiplicity of worlds, and the retributive consequences of human action. The theory proposes that in the course of cosmic process, atoms unite and separate continually. At the conclusion of a cosmic period, atoms isolate themselves from one another and rest -- until they are again set in motion and re-coagulate, allowing souls that failed to reach salvation in the previous cosmic period to receive the fruits of their actions. Oppie might even have had a thought about Gregor's origin, based on the accompanying doctrine of the transmigration of souls.

Oppie probably did not "believe" this. But he did distinguish between "short half-life knowledge" and "long half-life knowledge". Scientific papers came and went. The Vedas and the Upanishads did not. One of his flippant remarks suggests a tantalizing third explanation for the designation Trinity: "At Trinity," he said, "Gregor, the bomb, and the world were all being tested."

Oppie was barely understood by others. For his "second thoughts", Truman called him a "crybaby" and refused to have anything more to do with him. But for all his moral and intellectual depth, he remained, first and foremost, a scientist. It is sad, but appropriate, that his famous comment on the explosion cited not a moral vision of cosmic apocalypse, but a purely cosmological cataclysmic show, Lord Krishna's Best-Ever Fireworks Display.

Thus Spake Zarathustra

Gregor's choice of farewell performance was even more significant than it first appeared. It was Teller who pointed out the Zoroastrian doctrine underlying Gregor's offering. His dance was not just a simple critique of bugbear Science, with a self-congratulatory coda of "cure" from its contrapuntal snare.

The religion of Zarathustra preached to pre-Islamic Persians a dualistic doctrine of struggle between light/good, and darkness/evil. Though equally balanced, it was two against one: the God of Light, Ahura Mazda, had as adversaries two demons, a good-cop/bad-cop deal, a one-two punch at humanity. Humans were free to do evil or good -- as they chose. The two tempters were Lucifer and Ahriman.

As we know even in Christendom, Lucifer whispered in man's ear: "You are like the gods, knowing good and evil." Lucifer, the master of delusion, tempting men to believe they are more powerful, more effective, more beautiful, more benevolent, more admired than they really are. Lucifer, appealing to man's pride and ambition, counseling disregard of limitations. Hence, the Tower of Babel, the Flight of Icarus, the Birth of Dolly. Lucifer started men and women out on the path to freedom. Not unsimilar to the Judeo-Christian story. Lucifer brought the gift of Art.

Ah, but then there is Ahriman, a character dutifully unmentioned in our covetous times. Ahriman whispers in the other ear, "You are *only* man with *no* divine element in you. But you can turn to your own use the entire world, and everything in it. There is no limit to the knowledge, goods, or power you can acquire. The material world is all there is, so make the most of it." Knowledge of the world is Ahriman's realm; he is constantly whispering information, suggesting new machines to invent. Ahriman wants humanity to advance at breakneck speed, long before ego and moral nature are ready. The future is already here, the sky's the limit, humanity's job is to create an earthly utopia here and now, crammed with sensual and intellectual enjoyment, and endless material possessions. Ahriman brought the gift of Science -- the cold, razor-sharp intellect of Science.

Gregor had danced an escape from *both* Lucifer and Ahriman that high-summer night in the blockhouse. His choice of Strauss and Nietzsche, was designed to help us make that distinction. The twelve strokes of "O Mensch, gib Acht!" named for us to our current marker in spacetime: midnight, and eternity.

Diane Bloom was educated at The Bronx High School of Science, Sarah Lawrence College, and holds a Ph.D. in Educational Theory from The University of California at Berkeley. She is the author of many books, including *Three Cultures: Science, Faith, and the Humanist Tradition* (Scribner's, 1968), *Learning from a Devastated Time: Americans and the Black Hole of History* (Simon & Schuster, 1991), and *Poetry as Reality: The Fourth "R" in American Education* (FS&G, 1998). She served in the Roosevelt, Truman and Carter administrations as Assistant Secretary in charge of Adult Education, and is currently professor emeritus at the New School for Social Research.

Related Titles

Gogol, Nicolai, *The Overcoat and Other Tales of Good and Evil*, trans. David Magarshack, Norton, 1965. See especially "The Nose".
Gordon, David George, *The Compleat Cockroach*, Ten Speed Press, 1996.
Ives, Charles, *Essays Before a Sonata*, Norton, 1970.
Kafka, Franz, *The Complete Stories*, Schocken, 1995.
Mann, Thomas, *Doctor Faustus*, Knopf, 1948.
Rhodes, Richard, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, Simon and Schuster, 1986.
Smith, Page, *Redeeming the Time: A People's History of the 1920s and the New Deal*, Viking Penguin, 1986.

Praise

An early-on letter to the author from Stuart-Sinclair Weeks, Director of the Center for American Studies, Concord, Mass.:

"...Always preceding power, and with much power, always, always much more love."

Dear Marc,

In my nearly 50 years of reading and writing, I've never come upon a book (novel does not do justice to the work) such as your *Insect Dreams*. It comes as close to the realization of the "Great American Novel" as any story I can imagine - without even taking into account its European backdrop and global strands and implications. "Gregor Samsa" is, by my reading, on a par with Moby Dick, not least in your thorough examination of its main character - as leagues apart (on first glance) as Kafka's further metamorphosed cockroach is from Melville's breaching whale.

What has your remarkable story given me? Though I can think of many places to start, I'm not sure where to end. In this note, I'll mention but a few.

* Your main character is a genuine hero, in a day and age when few vie for such a title and even fewer, it often seems, are up to it. The book is truly inspiring.

* You have given me my history, the history of my history, as both an American and a world citizen, in an intimate, thorough, and profoundly human way. (Numerous times while reading, I thought here's Howard Zinn's *The People's History of America* in novel form.)

* The language is remarkable, inspiring, and, I sensed at many points throughout, inspired. I could hear the gifted cellist in you bringing its artistry to the "score".

* And the thought is as rich and exquisite as the language.

* Despite the fact that you clearly have deep and strong feelings about the subject(s), the events of our century -- from the holocaust to baseball and pretty much everything in

between -- you've managed (intended?) to present them "objectively", soundly, and thus respected the reader, leaving us not only free, but, in a very real sense -- along with your main character -- freeing us from the specters of past, present, and future. This is an accomplishment. ("How has he managed to incorporate and encompass such a breadth of diverse, and frequently conflicting, voices in his mortal breast?", I frequently asked myself while turning the pages. I was not surprised to come upon Faust's entreaty, "Ach, two souls dwell in my breast...."

* A profound compassion, particularly for those of our brothers and sisters whose plight in life is a sorry one, overflows your pages and truly stirs the soul - not an easy task in our seemingly callous times.

Well, Marc, I could go on. But, perhaps, in this case, the less said, the more said. Let me conclude with a simple thanks, heartfelt, for what perhaps can most aptly be summed up as a labor of love. (I began this letter with the words that you used to conclude, pretty near, your novel.)

The book is already "published". It's just a matter of time before it finds its printer and audience. (My advice for your agent is that she find an editor who is, first and foremost, a human being and hand-deliver this gift, text-book of humanity.) I don't see what more you can, or should, do than to just keep writing, as long as there is a story in you and the telling of it is, indeed, ful-filling. Above all, perhaps, the work is an act of faith and calls for us all to keep the same.

I'm glad to help in this final step anyway I can and would be more than pleased to forward an overview of the novel and/or sample chapters to friends and colleagues connected with the Center for American Studies at Concord. If the spirit moves them to crack the cover, they'll discover, I'm sure, that this is a "story" that doesn't take but rather gives time - touches, indeed, of eternity. Yes, my thanks and respects,

Stuart-Sinclair

P.S. One more point: "Gregor Samsa: A Life" is just that: a reference book for life - one, I don't see myself ever putting down. So much to take up....