

## **The identity of Milan Kundera as astrologer**

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*Abstract.* In his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera describes how he was fired from his job and secretly wrote astrology columns. I register a puzzle that various readers should feel about this information, owing to the distinctive style of Kundera: how can this be kept a secret? I also propose solutions.

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*“Bookshops please:*

*A copy of Kundera’s prophecies!”*

Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* does not just contain fiction. It also contains autobiographical pieces. One of these, in the vicinity of a troubling confession, tells us:

Soon after the Russians occupied my country in 1968, I was driven from my job (like thousands upon thousands of other Czechs), and no one had the right to give me another. Some young friends too young to be on the Russians’ lists and thus still working in editorial offices, schools, and film studios would come to see me. (1996: 82)

Apologies but I cannot resist an insensitive remark: obviously it was not Vladimir Nabakov invading! Kundera tells us that he ended up doing some work in secret, for a weekly mass-circulation magazine:

When R. asked me to write an astrology column for the weekly in secret, I of course reacted enthusiastically and advised her to tell the editorial board that the writer would be a brilliant nuclear physicist who did not want his name revealed for fear of being made fun of by his colleagues. (1996: 83)

Perhaps you can just imagine Kundera's column. (He wrote thousands of horoscopes apparently.) That brings me to my problem.

How do we, or some readers, reconcile these two commitments:

- (i) Kundera has an instantly recognizable style.
- (ii) He is writing astrology columns in secret.

Would not someone just read the column and think. "This is none other than Milan Kundera"? Even the background story he devises seems typical Kundera. To elaborate a little: a brilliant nuclear physicist complains of digestion issues and thereby escapes departmental meetings to write his column, before meeting his lover. What are the entries for this week? "History has its cycles: that man should never forget. The knowledge of such cycles is essential to the being of your sign. Yes, Virgo, you have always understood the cycle. There is a time for sowing and a time for reaping and today you shall reap the rewards of yesterday's labour."

A solution is to propose that Kundera's style is not as individual as it appears to readers. Every schoolboy is a little Kundera in his homeland even. Another solution is that the appearance of a fixed style is somewhat illusory. Kundera is much more versatile than he seems. If circumstances make it rational for him to write in another style, he can and will.

**Reference.** Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber.