The Conformist

Susan Neiman

Daniel Kehlmann's latest novel, *The Director*, documents the little compromises that led G. W. Pabst, like millions of other people, to accept fascism.

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Daniel Kehlmann; illustration by Christoph Niemann

Reviewed:

The Director

by Daniel Kehlmann, translated from the German by Ross Benjamin

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Daniel Kehlmann has been celebrated for two decades in Germany and Austria as the shooting star of contemporary literature, but his work, though translated into forty languages, has received far less attention in English. Now his latest novel, *The Director*, appears in

English at the moment Americans need it most. On one level it's the story of the film director G.W. Pabst, who left Europe for Hollywood in 1934 with a reputation as the leftist creator of such films as *The Joyless Street*, *Pandora's Box*, and *The Threepenny Opera*. For reasons he never explained, he returned to Europe just when most artists, leftists, and Jews were desperately seeking passage in the other direction. There followed a dismal career as the star director of the Third Reich, with Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels putting everything a filmmaker needed at his disposal. On another level, however, the novel is an exacting analysis of the phenomenon Hannah Arendt called the banality of evil. If you're seeking an understanding of the ease with which anyone can be brought, step by small step, to sell her soul to fascism, you must read this book.

It's not the first time Kehlmann's timing has been fortunate. His five early books showed promise and, in hindsight, even daring, but his breakthrough came when he was thirty with *Measuring the World* (2005). The book is structured around the parallel lives of the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss and the scientist-explorer Alexander von Humboldt, intellectual giants whose lives in the early nineteenth century could not have seemed more different. Gauss was the son of a man who worked variously as a butcher, gardener, and bricklayer. His astonishing mathematical talent lifted him out of poverty and eventually to international acclaim, but he barely left his province and preferred calculation to anything else.

Humboldt was born into aristocracy and wealth, which enabled him to fund a private exploration of a sizable portion of northwestern Latin America, where he braved mosquitoes in the tropics, ice in the Andes, and the incomprehension of Spanish monks and indigenous peoples alike. He described his five-year journey in thirty volumes—illustrated with his own superb drawings of plants he'd collected, volcanoes he'd climbed, and Aztec hieroglyphics he'd tried to decipher—after his return to Europe via Washington, D.C., where Thomas Jefferson invited him to recount his travels in the newly built White House. Kehlmann described the novel as a comedy, and it is very funny. But its narrative forces the reader to think about how we understand the world. Is it best captured through numbers or experience? What price genius? Are those whose discoveries live on in history condemned to be alienated from the present in which most of us live? Must we choose between happiness and glory?

When Kehlmann began work on the novel, Humboldt was hardly a household name in Germany. (Gauss never became one. How many of us really grasp what it means to have proven Euclidean geometry wrong?) But German cultural institutions like round-numbered anniversaries, so in 2004 the bicentennial of Humboldt's return to Europe became the occasion for a left-liberal cultural project. Exhibitions and festivals were organized, and lavish editions of his works were issued by Die Andere Bibliothek, a publishing house founded by the revered German poet and polymath Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who thought Humboldt was the ideal role model to lead Germany into the twenty-first century. He was bold, he was enlightened, he was passionately universalist, he loathed slavery and colonialism, and he was even a forerunner of environmentalism. "Only one who, like Humboldt, pursues his projects *con amore* will have a chance in the future," wrote Enzensberger on announcing the publication of Humboldt's *Cosmos*.

Historical novels had long been out of fashion, but *Measuring the World* not only won critical acclaim and countless literary prizes; it became one of the best-selling German books since

the war. The drumroll of the Humboldt Year doubtless prepared the way for that reception, but it didn't explain the book's international success. At the time, though, the world was open to reading about Germans who had nothing to do with fascism. Reunification had had some bumps, to be sure, but as twentieth-century history goes, it seemed a success story. The left-leaning German government challenged George W. Bush's war on Iraq; the association of "German" with "Nazi" seemed due for reconsideration. Why not through Alexander von Humboldt?

For anyone living in Germany, Kehlmann was no longer one of a number of promising young writers but the one it was almost impossible to ignore. But I did, and not just because I had more than enough to read. Who doesn't? I thought the hullabaloo was hype. *Wunderkinder*, I reckoned, exist in mathematics or music, but first-rate literature requires what Germans call *Menschenkenntnis*—knowledge of the human soul. What goes into that? Patience, generosity, openness to surprise, the ability to read gestures, grins, and glances as well as words. Ripeness, in short. Surely no one achieves that before their fifth decade, if at all?

I had another qualm, too. The war and its aftermath had been German literature's main subject since 1945—appropriately enough, most would say. The Holocaust had opened an abyss between the Nazi period and the German culture that preceded it. The story that lucky prisoners at Auschwitz played Wagner to accompany less fortunate ones to the gas chamber remains unconfirmed, but who could forget it? Many writers were uneasy about using the German language, which Theodor W. Adorno suggested was drenched in barbarism. Arriving in Berlin in 1982, I quickly learned that quoting the Goethe I'd memorized in preparation for the journey was really, really uncool.

Saying "enough about Auschwitz already" in public could lead to scandal, as it did when Martin Walser opposed "this permanent show of our shame" in a speech accepting Germany's highest literary prize in Frankfurt in 1998. But the audience's applause signaled agreement. Had Kehlmann made a clever calculation that the time was right for a German novel that avoided Nazis entirely?

He had not, I later learned. *Measuring the World* was inspired by his admiration for Latin American magical realism, which he decided to approach through German history. Had I bothered to read it then, I would have seen the hint in Humboldt's comment after learning that 20,000 prisoners had been sacrificed in one day at the Teotihuacán temple: "So much civilization and so much horror. What a combination! The exact opposite of everything that Germany stood for." I could have seen the novel as a satire on the German character, whose faults are evident enough without Nazis. Even the country's greatest thinkers tend toward stiffness, heaviness, and difficulty in grasping other modes of being. In the novel Humboldt is unable to tell stories: he prefers to recite a solemn Goethe poem that leaves his Spanish companions bored and puzzled.

All this can be read as a promissory note, especially in light of an interview Kehlmann gave to a journalist who asked why he didn't turn his pen to the major subject of postwar German literature. The thirty-two-year-old replied that he wasn't yet ready. Too many mediocre books

had been written about the Nazis, and the subject was so serious that it demanded an extremely good one. *The Director* shows how right he was to take his time.

After the staggering reception of *Measuring the World*, Kehlmann published *Fame* (2009), a novel made up of nine interconnected stories. *Fame* is not only squarely located in the twenty-first century; it examines the contemporary psychological and metaphysical changes we've been too busy with our phones to notice. The obliteration of time and space, for example—the ease with which we now move through both without knowing exactly where and sometimes who we are, which makes it possible to deceive a boss or a spouse and to change our relations with them and ourselves. With each chapter written in a different style and plenty of turns that make you wonder just how self-referential the author is being, *Fame* might be the postmodern novel Kehlmann wrote just to prove he could.

One can also call it chutzpah. How does a newly famous thirty-three-year-old write a novel about fame—its friction with realities, its incongruities, its hidden costs—without sounding unbearably smug? If you're Kehlmann, you create a character who vaguely resembles you. Leo Richter, a neurotic writer celebrated as brilliant, complains incessantly about the drawbacks of fame: the repetitive audiences, the stupid reviewers, the mediocre finger food, the news that a colleague received a prize he thinks should be his. Moreover, he seems incompetent to deal with the everyday world that holds him in fear, and he needs his girlfriend's assurances to get through the day. She, meanwhile, works for Doctors Without Borders. Accompanying Richter on a book tour, she retreats to the hotel bathroom to take calls about kidnapped colleagues because she worries that he cannot handle the sort of life-and-death matters she manages daily—or that he will turn it into literature. The story is at once savagely funny and bitterly true, a reflection on the triviality of art and the importance of importance. One can't help suspecting that this is Kehlmann's preemptive self-critique, or his deepest fear.

Or perhaps not the deepest, as he suggested in an interview about the part of *Fame* he considers his best, the story of an older woman who resolutely plans her assisted suicide in Switzerland and changes her mind once she gets there:

Writing is an amoral activity, brutal and ruthless. When an author creates characters to give them a hard time, this is also, on a higher level, what we imagine God is doing with us, so that our suffering has a purpose which is not possible to tolerate otherwise. But the question remains: couldn't it still be different? Where is the grace, why is mercy not more powerful than the plot?

Having initially avoided reading Kehlmann's earlier work, I finally broke down and ordered a copy of *Tyll* (2017) after a critic I trust wrote a glowing review, though why I should spend time on a German folk hero from the Thirty Years' War still eluded me.

Till Eulenspiegel, as his name is usually spelled, is a clever jester who appears in tales written in German, Dutch, and Russian. He challenges authorities and exposes hypocrisies but can

also be puzzlingly perverse. Tyll fascinates because he is free, and as such he's a device Kehlmann uses to take his readers through the repressive and violent panorama of Central Europe during the bloodiest war it had hitherto known. The legendary acrobat is moved up a century or two so he can meet figures who actually existed, including Athanasius Kircher and Oswald Tesimond; the Winter Queen, Elizabeth Stuart of Bohemia (whom Tyll calls Liz); and even William Shakespeare. The book is impressively researched, but it's not exactly realistic. What's important in it is concepts: what it feels like to be always hungry and rarely literate, to live in terror of evil spirits, to be condemned to the same lives your parents and their parents lived in the fixed world of their village. Only the traveling folk—musicians and jugglers and storytellers like Tyll—could roam the Holy Roman Empire at will. The cost of that freedom was high: they could claim protection from no one.

Not that there was much protection for anyone in mid-seventeenth-century Germany. Kehlmann opens with an imagined story of Tyll's father, Claus, a miller who would rather count stars and solve logical conundrums than attend to his mill or his family. Claus's ability to heal with herbs and spells, and a small treasury of books stolen from his former employers, set him apart from the rest of the villagers and attract the attention of two wandering Jesuits. They soon try him for witchcraft. Kehlmann shows how the church and the clumsy self-taught miller they fear are both bound by inseparable webs of science and superstition. Tyll flees after watching his father confess on the scaffold. Of course the confession was forced, cries Dr. Tesimond. "Without torture no one would ever confess anything!"

Tyll takes to the road, singing, dancing, and tightrope walking for crowds who pay for the excitement he brings into their barren lives. Eventually he becomes court jester to Frederick I, the dethroned Winter King, a turn that leads us through the stench and savagery of war, the absurdity of royal tokens and rituals, and pretenses to power when even dignity is gone. Remarkably, Kehlmann finds a way to imagine in full every character in the novel. Even the pretentious and treacherous Kircher is granted a moment of humanity as he climbs the platform to preside over Claus's trial: he fears that his superior will perceive his dizziness and judge him unfit to join the higher Jesuit orders. And though the Winter King's claim to the Bohemian throne was the spark for the war that devastated Europe, his piteous appearance at the camp of the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus is described with such poignance that even cynics must be moved. In crisp, spare, contemporary prose, Kehlmann feels his way into the trials of a pregnant peasant and opens the heart of a queen. In this book, the irony that shimmers through all his prose plays against a backdrop of sadness—the sadness of a world in which hope is left for heaven and even tentative joy is rare.

The nameless narrator opens a window into the seventeenth century. Those who people it are confined not only by tradition and technology (or its absence) but by deep beliefs about danger. The conviction that evil spirits will thwart or kill those who cross their paths keeps most of them at home. Kehlmann has a weakness for spirits and ghosts; in homage to *Macbeth*, one collection of his essays is entitled "Come, Spirits." Here he makes us wonder if fear of them might be justified, for we never learn what happened to Tyll during the two nights alone in the wood that left him naked on a tightrope wearing a dead donkey's head. All the boy says is that the Devil came.

Tyll offers a better argument for the Enlightenment than any philosopher ever constructed by bringing us into the world that came before it. When you finish the novel, you wonder how

people endured the previous age at all. Despite the defects of the Enlightenment—defects made comically clear in *Measuring the World*—would you really want to live in the world it challenged?

Calling a contemporary novel philosophical is the quickest way to consign it to oblivion, so let me assure you that Kehlmann's are easy to read. (Certain German critics hold it against them.) One might even admit they are fun—well plotted, fast-paced, multiperspectival, and surprisingly funny—even when the subject is as mundane as a professional intrigue or a marriage quarrel. His touch is so light and so often laconic that it's easy to miss the depth of the novels, as I did the first time I read *Measuring the World.* The passage in which Humboldt expresses his horror at human sacrifice begins like this:

> Twenty thousand in one place, in one day, was unthinkable. The victims would never tolerate it. The audience wouldn't tolerate it. What was more, the world order would not support it. If such a thing happened, the universe would come to an end.

The universe, said the worker, didn't give a shit.

But it's his literary essays that make Kehlmann's seriousness clear. He is as generous toward the books he loves as he is toward the characters he creates. One of his three essay collections is simply called "Praise." It can only be hoped that a selection of these essays will soon appear in English, and not only because the essays illuminate the fiction; if his literary prose seems effortless, the essays show just how much thought and effort it took. But the essays are a pleasure in their own right. There's no better short piece on Voltaire than his, and his interpretation of Leibniz is so moving it made me reconsider my own. Kehlmann's reading is enviably prodigious, and he records debts to Nabokov and Borges and Beckett, Shakespeare and Jonathan Franzen, among many others, compares Schiller's *Wallenstein* to Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton,* is scathing on Harold Bloom. Even essays on authors you may not cherish contain little gems of insight, like his definition of charisma in an essay on Updike: "The remarkable injustice of the distribution of God's grace."

Of the many philosophical questions that permeate Kehlmann's work, none is more constant than the problem of evil. Earlier versions of it came in theological terms: If God is all-powerful and benevolent, why does he allow his creatures to suffer? Augustine found an answer in God's gift to us of free will; if we abuse that great gift, the fault is on us. If that were the case, we still might be miserable, but the world would make sense. It does not take Auschwitz to see that it doesn't; the tragedies recounted in *Tyll* demonstrate that just as well. Yet Kehlmann thinks Auschwitz left us with a loss nothing can repair, as he said in a speech on the birthday of Imre Kertész, whose novel *Fateless* (1975) detailed his imprisonment at Auschwitz:

> The old concept of fate, which Schopenhauer once revived free of all religious tradition, seemed to survive every refutation by the twentieth century…[but]

Kertész has made us understand that the scandal of Auschwitz is not limited to the bestial industrialized violence, but that what happened there makes us all forever lost. Anyone who still claims a destiny for themselves must now ascribe one to the murdered millions…and because this implication is monstrous, indecent, absurd, and morally unacceptable, we too have lost our destiny with those who rose as smoke into the air.

To hold on to the idea that the world must make sense implies that the industrialized murder of millions made sense. Even to construe our own lives as meaningful, with purposes that, should they be good ones, ought to be rewarded, is to imply that the fate of those murdered millions is their just reward. It's not a conclusion we normally stop to draw when celebrating our good fortune or raging at our losses, but the logic is there all the same. Our lives are as subject to contingency as those that went up in smoke.

This has always been the subject of tragedy. Oedipus arriving at the crossroads a quarter of an hour later would have led to a simple epic. Juliet waking a quarter of an hour earlier would have earned her a place in teen romance. Tragedy is about the ways that virtue and happiness fail to coincide, for the want, or the excess, of some inconsiderable piece of the world that turns out to be the only thing that mattered. Hegel wrote that "the sole aim of philosophy is to eliminate the contingent"—a claim that exposes not just the poverty but the pomposity of philosophy.

Kehlmann's preoccupation with contingency surely has some autobiographical roots. His secular Jewish father, who later became a theater director, was interned in an Austrian labor camp; only a series of accidents prevented his transfer to the death camps where much of the family perished. Kehlmann's early education at a Jesuit school in Vienna must have provided not only material for the background of his novel *F* (2013) but sufficiently theological soil for confusion to grow. Though Kehlmann only wrote about these matters later, his engagement with the metaphysical problem of evil is evident in his earliest work. In his second novel, *Mahlers Zeit* (Mahler's Time, 1999), a mathematician is driven mad by the thought that Creation contains an error he has discovered: "God calculates, but sometimes he makes mistakes." It's a problem Kehlmann emphasizes when reflecting on other artists. Reviewing a movie by Lars von Trier, he writes, "Seldom has a film allowed its audience to feel the presence of evil as a metaphysically destructive power."

Anyone who thinks the Enlightenment was an age of sunny optimism confuses *Candide* with its author, who wrote it to show the absurdity of such views. No age thought more about the problem of evil, and one of the Enlightenment's achievements was detaching metaphysical evil—the senselessness of the world as it is given—from moral evils, the harms people do to one another. The great modern novelists—Eliot, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky—were raised in awareness of this split and focused their attention on the evils people do, but metaphysical/theological questions are always waiting in their shadows, even for the atheist Eliot. In writing of Voltaire's "deceptive simplicity," Kehlmann could be writing of himself. He shuns easy answers. Theodicies are forms of justification; they are easily abused. Why try to change anything if this is how the world is meant to be? In *Fame*, he savages a Brazilian

writer whose treacly self-help books made him a multimillionaire but who panics as he realizes he is wrong:

> Every clever argument pales before the extent of pain, before the sheer fact that there is pain, always in every era…. He saw the gaps in the booksellers' shelves, the horrified priests and blanching women, the stunned doctors' wives and the minor clerks on five continents, for no one would now tell them that their suffering makes sense.

As Kehlmann wrote ten years later, "Art always tells of two things: first, how strange the world is, and second, how much people suffer, in these times and past ones, always differently and always the same."

Deep as they are, these are questions that may come up any day, often in vulgarized forms. "Why me?" is a question you're most likely to ask when things go wrong, but those who are wise may question their good fortune, too. Kehlmann did in "The Catastrophe of Luck" (a phrase he took from Kertész), the speech he gave upon accepting a prominent literary prize in 2007: "Pure contingency is not something we like to dwell on, so we make everything that happened in the past a prelude to the present, as if it weren't a matter of chance at all." He then described years of hard work and failure, books he wrote that were unsold and unnoticed, so that his career might have ended in obscurity. It's a generous thought to express upon winning a prize; it also expresses a touch of unease.

Though many of us had long been alarmed by Trump's fascist tendencies, no one predicted how quickly the world would bow to them; *The Director* is far timelier now than when it was first published in 2023. Its German title, *Lichtspiel*—literally "Light-play"—hints at the novel's several themes. "Light-play" is an old-fashioned word for the early films made by Germany's major directors. At the same time it reflects the play of light and darkness that is the book's real subject, a gripping meditation on the ways in which anyone can abandon their ability to resist evil. (Ross Benjamin's translation is superb, possibly even better than the original.)

We now live in a world where "witch hunt" is just a metaphor. When disasters happen, we no longer seek supernatural causes. When pestilence strikes, we turn to epidemiologists, not inquisitors. If an earthquake occurs, we study geology and engineering. We restrict the concept of evil to human beings, and since Arendt we no longer expect even evildoers to be devilish. A cowardly bureaucrat can cause more harm than a sadist. And small temptations are harder to resist than great ones, for resistance to them looks neither heroic nor grand. That's why the banal sorts of evils are more dangerous. We need not look for causes of evil outside our own weakness, as Kehlmann's new novel details.

The Director shines a light on a few extraordinary people and reveals their behavior during the Third Reich to be painfully ordinary. Kehlmann's earlier novels are masterful at describing the excuses, equivocations, and lies we are loath to acknowledge, even when

they're fairly harmless: the polite pretense of recognizing an effusive stranger claiming old friendship, the encouraging words a child wants to hear when her parents' attention is completely distracted. Such scenes can be terribly funny. In *The Director* the author's *Menschenkenntnis* is on full display as he documents the little compromises that led millions of people to nod to fascism.

Always adept at dialogue in which people entirely talk past one another, Kehlmann begins his story in 1930s Hollywood, where the once-feted director is dazed and out of place. The hilarious conversations show him straining and failing to understand both the English language and American conventions, so he signals clueless agreement. Pabst's decision to stay in Europe in 1939 is accidental: he visits his ailing mother just before the war begins and the borders close. But the director has been miserable in Hollywood, where he's vaguely regarded as a pioneer of cinema but never gets the backing to make a movie, despite having discovered Garbo, who has a wonderful cameo in the book's first part.

Initially he curses the Nazi henchman who is sent to California to tempt him to return. Why not? asks the henchman, you're not a Jew, just a leftist who can be forgiven. Slowly, however, Pabst begins to welcome the accidents that leave him stranded in his native Austria and accommodates himself to the regime. Nothing I've ever read conveys so well how people in Nazi Germany got on with their lives. Kehlmann shows us the lackey who rejoices at his power to lock up cultivated elites who once ignored him, the wives of Nazi bosses using a book club to root out suspicious sympathies, and the terror of a screenwriter when the Gestapo finally knocks. The portrait of Pabst's (fictional) son Jakob is particularly superb, for the child quickly discerns what he must do to fit in. Children usually do. Jakob's calculation that a little bullying is useful to avoid being shunned as a nerd slides effortlessly into a full-throated commitment to the Hitler Youth and a joyful march to war.

His father's descent into compliance is slower but no less sure. The man who begins by hoping to escape Goebbels's office without raising his right hand ends by casually tossing off "Heil Hitler" at premieres. The director who was shocked to learn that Leni Riefenstahl used concentration camp prisoners as extras later muses about their efficiency when he puts them to work on his own set. To see how the process works, part of Pabst's meeting with Goebbels will do. The minister greets him with the words "Delighted, delighted, delighted!"

Pabst wondered whether a brief "Likewise" was too much of a concession; but before he had even given himself an answer, he heard himself saying: "Likewise!"

"I'm delighted you're delighted. Take a seat, let's be delighted together."…

The Minister smiled. His hands lay flat on the empty desktop. "The Red Pabst…. How was the trip? How's your family?…I'm really delighted."

"Likewise," said Pabst. Since he had already said it, it came more easily to him now. It didn't matter anymore….

This man, to whom once, in a life that was irrevocably over, he would never have spoken a word and whom he would have had chased off his set if he had dared to show up there….

“Consider what I can offer you,” the Minister interrupted, “for example, a concentration camp. At any time. No problem. But that’s not what I mean at all. I mean, consider what *else* I can offer you, namely: anything you want. Any budget, any actor. Any film you want to make, you can make. But you know that. That’s why you came to see me. That’s why you’re going to do penance.”…

“I ask for your understanding that, for health reasons alone, I can no longer—”

“But you are sorry?”

“Pardon me?”

“You have engaged in Communist propaganda, you were an enemy of the German people, you have made common cause with other enemies of the people and with Jews. Actually, all that is unforgiveable. And yet you’re sitting in front of me, drinking coffee, and…”

To gain a little time, Pabst leaned forward, took his cup, and carefully brought it to his mouth. “I was never a Communist. With all due respect, I have also not engaged in—”

“You misjudge the situation. I’m not arguing. If you had just the slightest idea of what could be in store for you, you wouldn’t even try. It is what it is, and I say what it is, and all you say here is: I’m sorry! And you say: Now I know better! And: I have recognized my mistakes. And I want to do my part to build a new Germany. Well?”

If you can’t imagine such a conversation in America today, you haven’t been reading the news.

There are no heroes in *The Director*—everyone yields in the end—but it’s not a book of despair. *S’expliquer n’est pas se justifier*—to explain is not to justify—is usually repeated in French, and it’s usually false. Most explanations, at least of human behavior, are sought as

justification. Kehlmann walks the fine line between explaining and justifying. He's too good an ironist to moralize, but his moral compass is true. In a 2017 essay he described "the basic humanist assumption the novelist takes for granted": that people gain in humanity the more you know about them. (The essay is about Trump, whom Kehlmann sees as an exception to the rule: the more you know about him, the more inhuman he appears.) The characters in *The Director*, by contrast, are so human that we understand their compromises and even identify with most of them.

But Kehlmann's play *Die Reise der Verlorenen* (The Journey of the Lost, 2018) tells the story of the *St. Louis*, the doomed ship that carried hundreds of desperate Jews out of 1939 Germany only to be denied permission to land at every port they tried. The play opens with a speech by a Nazi ship steward who describes himself as "a bad guy, but not an interesting one; just a resentful little wretch who can finally get revenge." He suspects the audience is murmuring, "What would I have done at the time?" It's a common phrase with which the first German generation growing up after the war deflected reckoning with their parents' misdeeds. Kehlmann calls it soft moral bankruptcy and writes that anyone who says it already knows they would have capitulated. Of course it's trivially true: any of us might fail when put to the test. But we ought to be able to say what we *should* do and to express hope that we will not fail. *The Director*, Kehlmann's stunning tale of what failure looks like, is a call to strengthen our spines.

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Susan Neiman

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