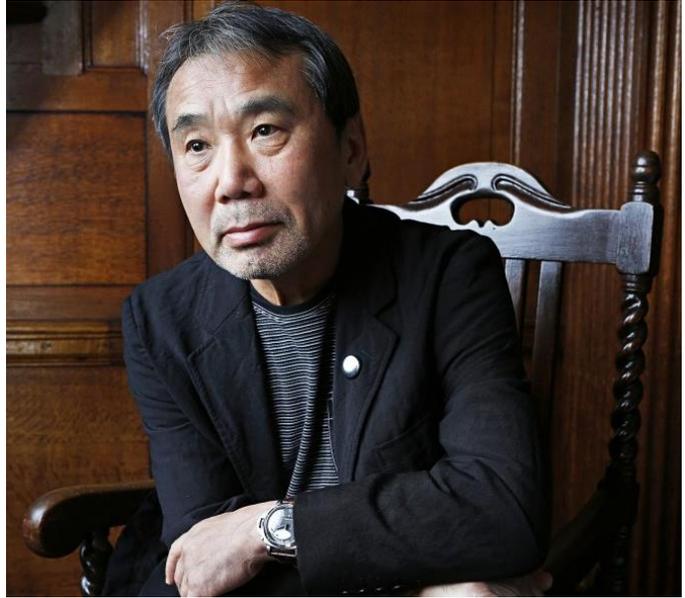


Haruki Murakami (born 1949)

Gale Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism

Introduction

Murakami is a best-selling novelist and short story writer whose works have been translated into forty languages. His unusual style, which combines elements of surrealism, science fiction, fantasy, and high and low culture-- all relayed with deadpan irony-- has consistently appealed to readers of diverse backgrounds for its evocation of modern detachment and the alienating effects of technology-based societies. Murakami's writings are highly evocative of popular culture in the United States, displaying an encyclopedic knowledge of American music, movies, television, brand names, and popular fiction, particularly the hard-boiled detective stories of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Carver, whom he cites as his earliest and most enduring influences. Murakami has also extensively translated works of modern American fiction into Japanese, including those of Carver, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, John Irving, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Murakami's eclectic technique, while enthusiastically greeted by Western critics, was harshly judged at first by Japan's literary elite, the *bundan*, who since World War II had advocated a serious literature grounded in history, politics, and authentic Japanese themes. Their unease with Murakami was compounded by his enormous appeal to the *shin-jinrui* ("new human beings")-- the affluent postwar generation who shunned Japanese values in favor of all things American, and who brought Murakami to the attention of a global audience. Some of Murakami's later works have directly addressed subjects of historical and political concern to the Japanese, thus containing the element of social consciousness considered so vital to the old guard of Japan's literary establishment. One of the harshest critics of Murakami's earlier writings, Nobel Prize-winner Kenzaburō Ōe, was among the committee who selected his *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru* (1994-95, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*), an investigation of Japan's role in World War II, for the prestigious Yomiuri Prize. In 2006 Murakami was awarded the Kafka Prize for his 2002 novel *Umibe no Kafuka* (*Kafka on the Shore*).



Biographical Information

Murakami grew up in Ashiya City, Japan, a suburb of Kōbe. His grandfather was a Buddhist priest and his parents, both of whom taught Japanese literature, encouraged a reverence for traditional Japanese values. However, Murakami rejected the classics of Japanese literature, first turning to European writers of the nineteenth century and then later, as a teenager, to American detective stories he acquired in Japanese paperback editions. Equipped with an American dictionary, Murakami began to read the stories of Hammett, Carver, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ed McBain in English, becoming

increasingly fascinated with American popular culture. He acquired a prodigious knowledge of jazz by spending his school lunch hours at record stores, and his transistor radio introduced him to the music of Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and the Beach Boys, whose songs provided the inspiration for the titles of some of his works. In interviews, Murakami has linked his distinctive style-- a rhythm of short sentences-- to his habit of translating into Japanese from his original, somewhat choppy, English, a language in which he was not proficient until later in life. In 1968, Murakami entered Tokyo's Waseda University, where he studied theater arts. When student uprisings caused classes to be dismissed, Murakami used the extra time to indulge his taste for American film. He married fellow student Yoko Takahashi in 1971; together, they operated a Tokyo jazz bar called Peter Cat for several years until 1981.

Murakami traces his decision to write fiction to an epiphany that occurred while he was watching a baseball game in 1978. His first effort was *Kaze no uta o kike* (1979; *Hear the Wind Sing*, which won the *Gunzo* journal's New Writer's Award. The book-- its title borrowed from a Truman Capote short story and featuring Beach Boys lyrics on the back cover-- became an instant success among young Japanese readers with its coming-of-age theme, detached sensibility, and oddball sense of humor. The protagonist of *Hear the Wind Sing*-- like those of Murakami's other novels-- is, significantly, both nameless and referred to as "Boku," the colloquial form of the Japanese pronoun for "I," rendered by old-school establishment writers with the more formal *watashi* or *watakashi*. In 1981, Murakami published his first work in a continuous series of Japanese translations of modern American fiction. With the enormous success of *Noruei no mori* (1987; *Norwegian Wood*), Murakami became a pop icon in Japan. He achieved international celebrity with his first translated novel, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the 1989 English-language version of *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (1982). After traveling in Greece and Italy, Murakami settled for a time in the United States, serving as a visiting scholar at Princeton University (1991 to 1993) and as a writer-in-residence at Tufts University (1993 to 1995). His return to Japan coincided with the horrific aftermath of 1995's Kōbe earthquake and Tokyo subway gas attack. In 1982, at the age of thirty-three, Murakami began training to run marathons, giving up the smoking and drinking habits he had acquired while managing Peter Cat. He has since completed twenty-five marathons and several triathlons; his physical workouts and their effects on his writing are recorded in his *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (2007).

Major Works

The protagonist in a Murakami novel is typically an apathetic young man-- either school age or newly entered into the workforce-- who commonly aspires to a career in advertising, journalism, publishing, or music. He is generally called on to aid in the unscrambling of a mystery that takes him in unexpected-- and bizarre-- directions. Murakami's typical protagonist has been viewed by critics as a bookish parody of the cynical, tough-guy American detective. He reports the supernatural occurrences he witnesses with the same frankness and deadpan understatement he brings to the minutiae of daily activity, making the abnormal seem perfectly normal. With the exception of the anonymous narrators, all of Murakami's characters have Japanese names, and the stories all take place in Japan. Yet, because of the profusion of references to Western culture, the novels might be imagined to take place anywhere in the world.

Hear the Wind Sing is the first novel in a trilogy that also includes *1973-nen no pinbōru* (1980; *Pinball, 1973*) and *A Wild Sheep Chase*. The story unfolds in flashbacks, as the twenty-nine-year-old narrator

of *Hear the Wind Sing*, an author and divorced upwardly-mobile urban professional man, recalls how it took him eight years to write his first book, a fictional account of the Japanese government's silencing of student unrest in the early 1970s. At the time of the uprisings, the narrator was a self-absorbed biology student obsessed with pop trivia. His political consciousness is awakened by a friend, known as the "Rat," a disillusioned activist. The third novel in the trilogy finds the narrator in search of a mystical sheep, who embodies the persona of the Rat, at the behest of a right-wing power broker. The novel *Dansu, dansu, dansu* (1988; *Dance, Dance, Dance*) continues the adventures of this same protagonist when he uncovers information leading to his discovery that an old girlfriend has been murdered by a famous movie star. The student uprisings of Murakami's college days also provide the backdrop for *Norwegian Wood*, which, like *Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi* (1992; *South of the Border, West of the Sun*), is a more realistic treatment of Murakami's familiar themes of alienation and loss.

Sekai no owari to hadoboirudo wandarando (1985; *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*) is more representative of Murakami's stories with its alternating chapters describing two separate, but equally surreal, worlds-- one set in near-contemporary Tokyo describing an information war between rival data-processing gangs and the other set in a timeless realm of the unconscious populated by unicorns and surrounded by a mysterious, threatening wall. In *Kafka on the Shore*, alternate chapters are narrated by the protagonist, a fifteen-year-old Tokyo runaway who lands in the faraway town of Takarnatsu, and the half-witted old man Nakata, possessed of supernatural powers that direct the boy's destiny.

Many of Murakami's short stories also portray the loss of borders between the real and the imaginary. Like his novels, they suggest a hyper-reality made possible by technology and indescribable in linear time, but they also express nostalgia for a less hectic, not-too-distant past: the same characters who take quantum leaps forward and backward in time to the other side of consciousness also quietly sip coffee in twenty-four-hour Denny's restaurants, listening to Bob Dylan and discussing Woody Allen movies. One of Murakami's most famous short stories is "TV People," included in the collection *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993), in which little men from inside the television set invade the protagonist's living room. A reversal of this motif occurs in the novel *Afuta daku* (2004; *After Dark*), in which a sleeping woman is literally sucked into a flashing television screen. "The Rise and Fall of Sharpie Cakes," from the short-story collection *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (2006), is a metaphoric account of Murakami's falling out with Japan's literary elite. In this story, the narrator enters into a contest to invent a new recipe for a popular snack food, but the judges-- the "Sharpie Crows"-- consider his innovation, though more palatable to younger consumers, far too radical.

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle and the two-volume *Andaguraundo* (1997-98; *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*) are distinguished among Murakami's output by their focus on historical and political events. In the first, a rootless young man descends into a dry well in Tokyo, where he is transported to wartime Manchuria through the voice of Mamiya, a survivor of the battle of Nomonhan. Though fantastical, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is based on extensive research; Murakami sought to confront Japan's legacy of aggression during World War II as a corrective to the popular Japanese image of its citizens as victims of the war. The first volume of *Underground* is a collection of interviews with victims of a sarin gas attack on a Tokyo subway that occurred in March 1995, perpetuated by a radical cult group called "Aum Supreme Truth." The second volume is a collection of interviews between Murakami and members of the cult. *Supuutoniku no koibito* (1999;

The Sputnik Sweetheart) was inspired by Murakami's sense of the inadequacies of language to describe the horror of such traumatic events as the Kōbe earthquake and the Tokyo subway attack. The Russian Sputnik-- the forerunner of modern communications satellites-- is used as a vehicle for ironic commentary on the limitations of information technology.

Critical Reception

Critical studies of Murakami rarely fail to address the subject of his attitude to Japan and to the West, especially the United States. These discussions invariably generate questions about his relationship to modern and postmodern trends in literature. As Rebecca Suter notes, first-generation postwar *bundan*-- self-appointed defenders of quality literature in the face of pop and pulp-- denounced the decadence of Murakami's early writings, considering him postmodernist in his rejection of Japanese themes and identity. Yet, as Steffen Hantke points out, Murakami simply presents his own reality: "Postwar Japanese culture as Murakami has experienced it and as he describes it in his fiction has embraced American cultural imports for so long that they are virtually taken for granted." Noting the tendency of Murakami's narrators to search for life's meaning in their memories of youth-- nostalgia that Suter traces to the influence of American modernists F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway-- some critics aver that Murakami believes corporate greed has caused technology to run awry in present-day Japan, resulting in the alienation of its citizens. Matthew Carl Strecher writes, "Murakami Haruki's *raison d'être* as a writer lies in certain key questions he raises about the nature (and ultimate fate) of individual identity in contemporary Japan. ... [A]s a result of the hyper-commodification of late-model capitalism, the total focus on economic prosperity, and the need in such an economy to control the desire of the consumer, individual identity has been gradually lost, replaced by what might be termed a 'manufactured' subjectivity."

Strecher also underscores the ambiguity of Murakami's position relative to literary practice, calling him a "reluctant postmodernist"-- engaged in a struggle to generate new insights about the human condition through the blurring of boundaries between real and magical worlds but aware of the limitations of language to express the inner feelings of his characters as they search the depths of their unconscious. Many critics have viewed Murakami's absurd, illogical plots as commentary on the fragmentation of modern life. On the other hand, Hantke argues that Murakami's disillusionment with society is expressed through the atmosphere of *noir* he creates: "A psychological reading of Murakami's central characters suggests that hard-boiled weariness functions as a mechanism against the trauma of modernity."

Despite the objections of Japan's literary and intellectual elite, Murakami has been widely embraced in his native country for his introduction of a new type of *jun-bungaku* ("serious literature") hero, one who reflects the confluence of East and West in Japan. According to Chloë Schama, it is this sense of Murakami as an agitator for change that accounts for his worldwide appeal: "Murakami's protest speaks not only to his own generation, but to generations younger and older; and not only to the Japanese, but to people scattered across the globe. ... The rebel figure, set against conformity and commodity, appears throughout Murakami's work. ..."