

## Never Let Me Go: A Profile of Kazuo Ishiguro

John Freeman / 2005

From *Poets & Writers Magazine*, (May/June 2005). Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Poets & Writers, Inc., 72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012. www.pw.org.

"Oh, you're making quite a mess of it, aren't you?" Kazuo Ishiguro studies my plate of scones with a raised eyebrow. It's teatime at a café called Richoux in Piccadilly, and my lesson in English manners and ritual is not going particularly well. Somehow, I have managed to scatter crumbs onto his side of the table. With ironic irritation, Ishiguro has another go at instruction: "First spread the crème down, and then place the preserves on top, like so," he says, preparing a scone that a still life painter could use. "Just think of it like putting blood on fresh snow." I take another swipe at it and build what looks like a bagel. Ishiguro frowns.

It's hard to tell whether or not this display of fastidiousness is a performance, a gambit in Ishiguro's strategy for our interview—the first, he later tells me, of up to three hundred he might give around the world during the coming year while promoting his new novel, *Never Let Me Go*, published by Knopf in April.

If this is the case, it would be hard to blame him. Ishiguro turned fifty last November and has come of age along with that promotional gulag known as the Author Tour. Most of his adult life has been spent writing novels (six, including this new one) and then talking about the process publicly. Not surprisingly, he has become quite good at controlling an interview's narrative. "You want to steer someone to a kind of revelation," says Ishiguro, revealing his hand somewhat, "but it has to seem natural, almost like a discovery."

Ishiguro's statement could be applied directly to his novels, all of which have been published in the United States, some making the best-seller lists. Best known for his Booker Prize-winner, *The Remains of the Day* (Knopf, 1989)—the story of a repressed butler who realizes he has given his life to an antiquated idea of service—Ishiguro has become the most voluptuously deceptive

John Freeman / 2005

195

storyteller writing in English. (His work also has been translated into twenty-eight other languages.) He has taken what novelist and critic James Wood calls the "reliably unreliable" narrator to its artistic zenith, creating characters so good at disguising themselves that, even after we have heard and seen them through an entire novel, they remain somewhat mysterious.

But while his facility has brought him accolades, Ishiguro admits there is a danger in being too good at the game of narrative trickery. "There's a certain way of telling a story," he says, speaking quickly in what the British once called a BBC accent: proper, middle class. His eyes are kind, but his tone is clipped. "There is a certain texture in your scenes that you become addicted to: the texture of memory. I have to be careful that I don't continue to use the same devices as I did in the past."

It is this texture, though, that has made his work from the beginning so assured, so potently inhabited. His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (Putnam, 1982), is told in the voice of a Japanese widow thinking back on her life and family, slowly coming to a realization about her daughter's suicide. In his second book, *An Artist of the Floating World*, a Japanese man tries to arrange his daughter's marriage as he struggles with the details of his earlier transgressions. Because both books are set in Japan, they were often viewed as veiled autobiography.

Ishiguro concedes there is a degree of accuracy to that perception. "To some extent, writing [*A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*] was an act of preserving things that would have otherwise faded in my memory," he says. But he doesn't see the works as drawn predominantly from his life. And he's uncomfortable about the assumptions that have been made about him and his writerly aims. "People kept asking me if I were trying to be a bridge between East and West in Japan. It was a real burden, and I also felt like a complete charlatan. I wasn't in a position to be an expert."

Read through some of the several dozen interviews he's given over the past five years, and it's easy to see why Ishiguro might feel this way. Born in Nagasaki in 1954, he left Japan at age five and wound up in Surrey, in the south of England, with his family. Ishiguro's father, an oceanographer, was to be employed temporarily by the British government. Funding for his work was continually renewed, however, and they ended up staying. Ishiguro attended grammar school in Surrey, then went on to university at Kent, where he studied American literature and took degrees in English and philosophy.

After graduating in 1978, he was employed briefly as a social worker, before going back to school and getting an MA in creative writing at the University of

## Never Let Me Go: A Profile of Kazuo Ishiguro

John Freeman / 2005

From *Poets & Writers Magazine*, (May/June 2005). Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Poets & Writers, Inc., 72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012. www.pw.org.

"Oh, you're making quite a mess of it, aren't you?" Kazuo Ishiguro studies my plate of scones with a raised eyebrow. It's teatime at a café called Richoux in Piccadilly, and my lesson in English manners and ritual is not going particularly well. Somehow, I have managed to scatter crumbs onto his side of the table. With ironic irritation, Ishiguro has another go at instruction: "First spread the crême down, and then place the preserves on top, like so," he says, preparing a scone that a still life painter could use. "Just think of it like putting blood on fresh snow." I take another swipe at it and build what looks like a bagel. Ishiguro frowns.

It's hard to tell whether or not this display of fastidiousness is a performance, a gambit in Ishiguro's strategy for our interview—the first, he later tells me, of up to three hundred he might give around the world during the coming year while promoting his new novel, *Never Let Me Go*, published by Knopf in April.

If this is the case, it would be hard to blame him. Ishiguro turned fifty last November and has come of age along with that promotional gulag known as the Author Tour. Most of his adult life has been spent writing novels (six, including this new one) and then talking about the process publicly. Not surprisingly, he has become quite good at controlling an interview's narrative. "You want to steer someone to a kind of revelation," says Ishiguro, revealing his hand somewhat, "but it has to seem natural, almost like a discovery."

Ishiguro's statement could be applied directly to his novels, all of which have been published in the United States, some making the best-seller lists. Best known for his Booker Prize-winner, *The Remains of the Day* (Knopf, 1989)—the story of a repressed butler who realizes he has given his life to an antiquated idea of service—Ishiguro has become the most voluptuously deceptive

storyteller writing in English. (His work also has been translated into twenty-eight other languages.) He has taken what novelist and critic James Wood calls the "reliably unreliable" narrator to its artistic zenith, creating characters so good at disguising themselves that, even after we have heard and seen them through an entire novel, they remain somewhat mysterious.

But while his facility has brought him accolades, Ishiguro admits there is a danger in being too good at the game of narrative trickery. "There's a certain way of telling a story," he says, speaking quickly in what the British once called a BBC accent: proper, middle class. His eyes are kind, but his tone is clipped. "There is a certain texture in your scenes that you become addicted to: the texture of memory. I have to be careful that I don't continue to use the same devices as I did in the past."

It is this texture, though, that has made his work from the beginning so assured, so potently inhabited. His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (Putnam, 1982), is told in the voice of a Japanese widow thinking back on her life and family, slowly coming to a realization about her daughter's suicide. In his second book, *An Artist of the Floating World*, a Japanese man tries to arrange his daughter's marriage as he struggles with the details of his earlier transgressions. Because both books are set in Japan, they were often viewed as veiled autobiography.

Ishiguro concedes there is a degree of accuracy to that perception. "To some extent, writing [*A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*] was an act of preserving things that would have otherwise faded in my memory," he says. But he doesn't see the works as drawn predominantly from his life. And he's uncomfortable about the assumptions that have been made about him and his writerly aims. "People kept asking me if I were trying to be a bridge between East and West in Japan. It was a real burden, and I also felt like a complete charlatan. I wasn't in a position to be an expert."

Read through some of the several dozen interviews he's given over the past five years, and it's easy to see why Ishiguro might feel this way. Born in Nagasaki in 1954, he left Japan at age five and wound up in Surrey, in the south of England, with his family. Ishiguro's father, an oceanographer, was to be employed temporarily by the British government. Funding for his work was continually renewed, however, and they ended up staying. Ishiguro attended grammar school in Surrey, then went on to university at Kent, where he studied American literature and took degrees in English and philosophy.

After graduating in 1978, he was employed briefly as a social worker, before going back to school and getting an MA in creative writing at the University of

East Anglia (Britain's equivalent of the Iowa Writers' Workshop). His first published work appeared in 1981 in a Faber anthology, which included three of his stories. One of those eventually became *A Pale View of Hills*. In 1983, *Granta* placed him on its first list of the 20 Best Writers Under 40, alongside Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie. In 1986, he married his Glaswegian wife, Lorna. And in 1992 they had a daughter, Naomi. It wasn't until 1989 that Ishiguro returned to Japan for the first time, on a book tour.

As he told Maya Jaggi in the *Guardian* in 1995: "I had very strong emotional relationships in Japan that were severed at a formative age. . . . I've only recently become aware that there's this other life I might have had, a whole person I was supposed to become."

That sense of loss delicately inflects Ishiguro's new novel, *Never Let Me Go*, which is his most radical stylistic departure to date. All of his other books are set in a recognizable historical context, from the backdrop of a ravaged Shanghai during the Sino-Japanese War in *When We Were Orphans* (Knopf, 2000) to the crumbling decline of Empire in *The Remains of the Day* to the post-World War II devastation of *A Pale View of Hills*.

*Never Let Me Go*, however, steps outside of history, planting itself in a kind of alternative England in the 1990s. Whereas Philip Roth's most recent novel, *The Plot Against America*, used a slight alteration in American political history as its foundation, *Never Let Me Go* changes a major detail in the realm of science. It imagines a world in which genetic cloning—not nuclear technology—turns out to be the defining science of the twentieth century.

To describe just what kind of book this creates is difficult. While the story has futuristic qualities, *Never Let Me Go* is free of the gadgetry and technology salient in most science fiction. The novel exists in a world whose contours we must infer, rather than witness, which gives it an ominous cast. At any reference to "sci-fi," Ishiguro bristles. "When I am writing fiction, I don't think in terms of genre at all. I write a completely different way. It starts with ideas."

Even though *Never Let Me Go* takes Ishiguro beyond his normal style, the book circles the same thematic territory of memory that his other books traverse. As the story unfolds, Ishiguro's protagonist, Kathy H., thinks back on her childhood, spent in a rural English boarding school called Hailsham. Instead of telling us about students who have become famous politicians or society mavens, "Kath" describes the achievements of her alumni, most of whom have become "carers" and "donors."

It takes a while for the reader to understand what this means, but one thing is clear: At thirty-one, Kathy does not have much time left to live, and telling her story is a way to make sense of the miniature crises and spectacles of her pre-shortened life. Ishiguro says he used the book's premise as a "metaphor for how we all live," calling to mind William Golding's similarly otherworldly novel, *Lord of the Flies*. "I just concertina-ed the time span through this device. A normal life span is between sixty to eighty-five years; these people [in *Never Let Me Go*] artificially have that period shortened. But basically they face the same questions we all face."

The gap between the enormities of what Ishiguro's characters have to forfeit as donors and carers and the relative shallowness of the day-to-day concerns that Kath describes as she looks back at her younger years gives *Never Let Me Go* an eerie poignancy. As Kath remembers it, her friends were hormone-crazy, keen on sex, and hell-bent on being cool. They listened to music on Walkmans and speculated about their teachers. They were typical teenagers. But all the while, their school kept them in the dark about what exactly awaited them in the world outside. Only Kathy, her friend, Tommy, and Tommy's girlfriend, Ruth, had the intellectual curiosity to figure out the parameters of their future. *Never Let Me Go* recounts the story of how their relationships came apart in the face of that realization.

The construct of *Never Let Me Go* allowed Ishiguro to explore a dark, basic question. "What really matters if you know that this is going to happen to you?" Ishiguro asks, referring to death. "What are the things you hold on to, what are the things you want to set right before you go? What do you regret? What are the consolations? What are the things you feel you have to do before you go? And also the question is, what is all the education and culture for if you are going to check out?" Given the urgency in Ishiguro's voice, these may not be only artistic concerns but personal ones as well. Based on early responses to his novel, they seem to be concerns that will be shared by readers. The book has already received starred reviews in *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *Library Journal*.

When Ishiguro began *Never Let Me Go*, it was set in America in the 1950s, about lounge singers trying to make it to Broadway. "The book would both be about that world and resemble its songs," Ishiguro says, "but then a friend came over for dinner and he asked me what I was writing. I didn't want to tell him what I was writing, because I don't like to do that. So I told him one of my other projects. I said, 'Maybe I'll write this book about cloning.'"

A year later, Ishiguro had given up on his original setting and themes and was polishing the book that has just hit the stands.

It's doubtful that Ishiguro will revisit his first idea. After all, he has already lived it in a certain way. He devoted the early part of his life to dreams of a career in music, writing his own songs and recording and sending out demos. "A lot of people, when they first start to write, copy the things they've read, and they write about the things they've experienced. I basically did all that with songwriting," he says. Ishiguro never hit the road with his act, but he did burn off much of his teenage angst. And he still plays the piano to relax today. But he has added another creative outlet to his fiction writing.

Even since *The Remains of the Day* was made into a movie, with a screenplay by Booker-winner Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Ishiguro has been working on screenplays himself. In 2003, his original screenplay, *The Saddest Music in the World*, was made into a movie starring Isabella Rossellini. In the fall, a film based on another of his screenplays, *The White Countess*, starring Ralph Fiennes and Vanessa Redgrave, will be released in the United States.

Judging by his interest in film (Ishiguro admits to having a home theater, and he has designs on building a film library), the coming years will bring more films, along with the fiction he has in the pipeline, about all of which he is typically reticent. It's a good life, of this he is aware, but the shadow of what would have happened had his family returned to Japan is ever present. Each day he lives this life, Kazuo Ishiguro knows he's forfeiting another one. It's why he keeps writing, imagining people in worlds not quite his own, people who must make their separate peace with opportunities missed, and say their goodbyes to the past.

## Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Karen Grigsby Bates / 2005

From *Day to Day* on NPR Radio (May 4, 2005). © 2005, National Public Radio, Inc.

**Alex Chadwick, host:** This is *Day to Day* from NPR News. I'm Alex Chadwick. Loss, memory, regret. Writer Kazuo Ishiguro explores these issues beautifully in all six of his novels. The most famous, *The Remains of the Day*, is set in England just before the Second World War. His most recent work, *Never Let Me Go*, is set in contemporary England with a disturbing twist. Kazuo Ishiguro spoke to *Day to Day's* Karen Grigsby Bates.

**Kazuo Ishiguro (KI):** In this novel, *Never Let Me Go*, the kids start off in a kind of boarding school, and they're literally sealed off from the rest of the world. But at some level, I think most childhoods are like that. Most childhoods should be like that. Certainly, when my daughter was younger, I tried to keep her in a bubble, sealed off from the realities of the world that actually awaited her. Even though, physically, we took her everywhere. It struck me how quickly even total strangers would enter into this conspiracy with myself and my wife to keep her in this bubble. Everybody wanted to censor out the sadnesses of the world. They desperately wanted this little child to be deceived about how nice a place the world was. Strangers passing in the street would turn themselves into little Disney cartoon characters and talk in a funny voice. We all seem to instinctively feel this urge and the majority of us are lucky enough to have this protective bubble early on.

I guess we might look back to that, and we realize that, okay, we were fooled to some extent, but perhaps we hold in our hearts to some extent a memory of the time when we thought the world was a slightly kinder place than the one we eventually found it to be. And so, I think that sense of nostalgia is quite important. It's almost like that kind of nostalgia is to the

feelings, to the emotions what idealism is to the intellect. It's a way of holding in your memory a picture of a better world than the one we find ourselves in.

**Karen Grigsby Bates (KGB):** You are Japanese which would probably confuse some people merely listening to you because they can't see you. Born in Nagasaki?

**KI:** That's right.

**KGB:** Moved to England when you were about five years old? And, grew up there ever since?

**KI:** Yes.

**KGB:** It's interesting, I read somewhere, I believe it was an interview you have with *The Guardian*, that you said your parents who have lived in England as long as you have still consider themselves "Japanese living amongst the English." You, on the other hand, what do you consider yourself?

**KI:** Oh, I consider myself British I suppose, because, you know, I've grown up and I've been shaped by Britain. I've been educated entirely in Britain. But, on the other hand, when I was growing up, I grew up in this home with Japanese parents, speaking Japanese. Perhaps most crucially—yes—in this home where my parents didn't have the attitude of immigrants but of visitors—temporary visitors—the idea was that we'd always go back within the next two years. And so, I think perhaps I did grow up observing the English around me at a slight distance, and many things that my friends thought were absolute right and wrongs, that they'd been taught by their parents, I realize that they were just tribal customs, because that's how my parents regarded them. Particularly the England I arrived in 1960 was still nominally a very Christian community. People went to church. There were all these things to do with good manners and protocol that were very important. And, of course, these things were very different within our house. So, I was always taught to respect the English manners and mores, but they were very much what the natives did. And something like the English class system was something that I felt I was on the outside of, whereas all my friends grew up very, very concerned about class. Because their parents were, whereas my own parents couldn't even interpret the class signals. And we didn't really understand. It was like a cold civil war going on in the country between the classes, and I was kind of on the outside of it.

**KGB:** It might have been for the best.

**KI:** Yes, I'll say it was.

**KGB:** Are there similarities between the two countries in terms of—I'm looking at *Never Let Me Go* and thinking again how reserved some of the people in this book are. We tend to think of the Japanese as reserved, at least in their interactions with us. I don't know, when they go home and close the door at night, maybe all hell breaks loose and we have no idea what's going on, and it's a party all the time! But, in general, we tend to think of them as emotionally withholding to a certain degree, very concerned with protocol . . . but to do the correct thing, to not give offense, to present oneself as a civilized person. Am I overreaching? Are there commonalities between the two that you've observed?

**KI:** Between the British and the Japanese, you're talking about? At that kind of surface . . . but I think that's just on the surface. But yes, there is a certain kind of style, a surface style that is very similar which does have to do with restraint . . . But, I think that's purely at the surface level. Just traveling around the world I sense that every community, every nation has its own set of strategies for actually protecting the inner emotions. And here in America, you know people do—particularly on the West Coast I noticed—people do seem to be more open at one level. You actually meet somebody and they do start telling you about their life and—they tell you about their divorce and . . .

**KGB:** Whether you want them to or not!

**KI:** Over the years—and I've been coming to America since I was nineteen years old—I can't help feeling that this is just another strategy, that there's a kind of personality that has been carefully constructed for presentation purposes. And it's quite difficult to get beneath this first presented figure that talks about the divorce and how they felt, and whatever. I mean, it's just another way of putting up a shield. I found the fear of emotions, the fear of exposing oneself—that is universal in almost every culture, just that different societies have different kinds of protection, different kinds of armor.

**KGB:** What do you want readers to take away from *Never Let Me Go*?

**KI:** Well, that's a very big question. I guess when people have come up to me at these events and try to sum up their response, the ones I've been most pleased with probably are the people who've said, "This is a very sad novel,