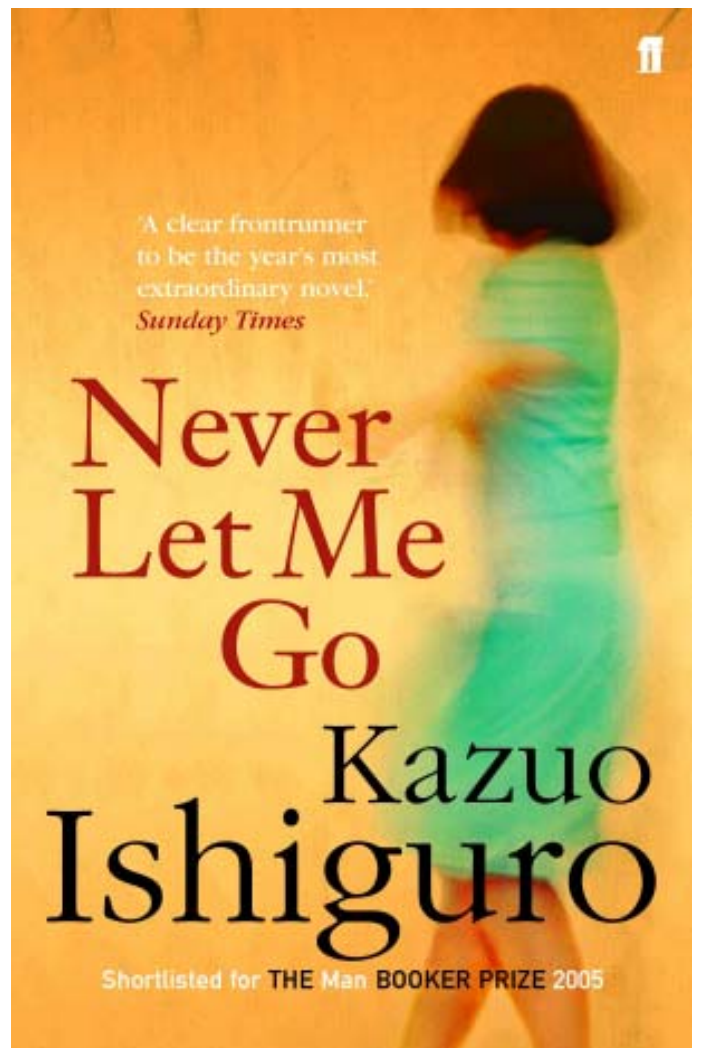


ALLEN&UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

In one of the most acclaimed and original novels of recent years, Kazuo Ishiguro imagines the lives of a group of students growing up in a darkly skewed version of contemporary England. Narrated by Kathy, now 31, *Never Let Me Go* hauntingly dramatises her attempts to come to terms with her childhood at the seemingly idyllic Hailsham School, and with the fate that has always awaited her and her closest friends in the wider world. A story of love, friendship and memory, *Never Let Me Go* is charged throughout with a sense of the fragility of life.

About the author

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954 and came to Britain at the age of five. He attended the University of Kent and studied English Literature and Philosophy, and later enrolled in an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of the novels *A Pale View of Hills* (winner of the Winifred Holtby Prize), *An Artist of the Floating World* (winner of the 1986 Whitbread Book of the Year Award, Premio Scanno, and shortlisted for the 1986 Booker Prize), *The Remains of the Day* (winner of the 1989 Booker Prize), *When We Were Orphans* (shortlisted for the 2000 Booker Prize and Whitbread Novel of the Year) and *Never Let Me Go*.

His books have been translated into twenty-eight languages. *The Remains of the Day* became an international bestseller, with over a million copies sold in the English language alone, and was adapted into an award-winning film starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson.

In 1995 Ishiguro received an OBE for Services to Literature, and in 1998 the French decoration of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. He lives in London with his wife and daughter.

Reviews

Andrew Riemer

Sydney Morning Herald

There is something decidedly odd about Kazuo Ishiguro's novels, even *The Remains of the Day*, his best-known book. The nature of this oddity is difficult to pinpoint but it is, by and large, a matter of tone and perspective.

Things are never quite right in Ishiguro's world. The way his characters speak often strikes a slightly off-key note. How he describes places—whether the ordinary and, at times, featureless English countryside of this new novel or the London and Shanghai of the 1930s in *When We Were Orphans* and the dream-Europe of *The Unconsoled*—brings to mind the way Magritte endowed commonplace things (a pipe, a fireplace) with mysterious menace.

This characteristic of Ishiguro's work may have something to do with his background. He was born in Nagasaki in 1954. In 1960, his parents moved to England but always intended to return to Japan. So their son was encouraged, like Akira in *When We Were Orphans*, to preserve his Japanese identity. But he stayed in England and learnt to how be English, even though a trace of a cultural accent still remains.

That unusual Englishness is evident from the start of this peculiar but impressive novel. The time is the late 1990s. Kathy H describes her life as a highly esteemed carer in the unemphatic language of middle-class England: 'I'm not making big claims for myself. I know carers, working now, who are just as good and don't get half the credit.' There's a hint of snobbery, too. Kathy mentions that she was a Hailsham student, 'which is enough by itself sometimes to get people's backs up'. Soon, in a predictably English way, she's off recalling her near-idyllic schooldays deep in the English countryside.

Yet even the opening pages of *Never Let Me Go* are filled with ambiguous implications, vague hints, a sense that there is something abnormal lurking behind this unremarkable world. What is Hailsham? Who are the 'donors' Kathy looks after? What is the 'fourth donation' she mentions several times? And what will become of her when she ceases to be a carer? It takes Ishiguro about 70 pages, to lift the veil hanging over the opening section of his novel. Kathy and her fellow students at Hailsham, among them Ruth, her best friend, and the volatile Tommy, have been genetically manipulated for a sinister purpose.

Never Let Me Go plays sophisticated and unsettling variations on a venerable tradition of dystopian horror stories. Indeed, one of the climactic scenes takes place in the time-honoured setting of many horror stories: a gloomy, forbidding house.

Nevertheless, the menacing atmosphere of this novel emerges far more from the terrible ordinariness of the world it describes: late-20th-century England with all its foggy dampness, its cosy, rather smug sense of propriety, shabby towns and villages, junk shops and tawdry supermarkets, garish advertising hoardings and mindless TV shows.

Undeniably, this is a gimmicky novel and that is something of a limitation. But beneath the carefully calculated revelations, this is a touching and even profound meditation on a riddle many of us prefer to ignore: what is it to be human? That is the conundrum the students of Hailsham, all predestined to follow the same path, must face. To follow them along that path is, as I have suggested, an unsettling though ultimately exhilarating experience.

Never Let Me Go—the title refers to a (perhaps fictional) pop song of the early '70s—marks Ishiguro's return to form after *When We Were Orphans*, one of those messy, spectacular disasters that only the most accomplished writers can produce.

What is more, it seems to me that with this memorable and disturbing work Ishiguro was revisiting the central concern of that earlier book: these orphans' sad search, if not for their parents, then at least for their true origins. And, of course, that search confirms the humanity of Kathy, Ruth and Tommy, the carers and donors at the heart of this strange novel.

Clone alone

M John Harrison

Guardian

The children of Hailsham House are afraid of the woods. In the days when their guardians were much stricter, the school myth goes, a boy's body was found there with its hands and feet removed. Sometimes that dark, threatening fringe of trees can cast such a shadow over the whole school that a pupil who has offended the others might be hauled out of bed in the middle of the night, forced to a window, and made to stare out at it.

When not applying peer pressure in this curious way, Hailsham children seem to have a nice life. The school places considerable emphasis on self-expression through art and, especially, on staying healthy. There are frequent, exhaustive medical check-ups. Smoking is a real crime, because of the way it can damage your body. Yet despite the care lavished on them, their world has a puzzlingly second-hand feel. Everything they own is junk. Teaching aids are rudimentary. Sometimes you get the feeling they're being taken care of on the cheap.

In fact, they are; and their fear of the woods reflects, in a distorted but fundamentally accurate way, their fate. They're organ donors, cloned to be broken up piecemeal for spares. The purpose of Hailsham is to prepare them for their future—to help instal the powerful mechanisms of self-repression and denial that will keep them steady and dependable from one donation to the next.

Never Let Me Go is the story of Kathy and Tommy and Ruth, and of the love-triangle they begin at Hailsham. Ruth is the controlling one, Tommy is the one who used to find it hard to keep his temper: they hope that love will save them. They've heard that love—or art, or both—will get you a deferral. Kathy—well, Kathy is a carer by nature as well as profession: she watches her friends break themselves against the inevitable, but never lets them go. After Hailsham, they grow from puzzled children to confused young adults. They live in a prolonged limbo, waiting for the call to donate. They're free to wander. They write essays, continue with their artwork, learn to drive, roam Britain looking for their 'possibles'—the real human beings they might have been cloned from.

Their lack of understanding of the world is funny and touching. They stare into the window of an ordinary office, fascinated by the clean modern space. 'It's their lunch break,' Tommy says reverently of the office workers, 'but they don't go out. Don't blame them either.' The clones look in at the society that made them, failing to understand its simplest social and economic structures.

As readers we're in a similar position. What Kathy doesn't know, we have to guess at. This sometimes excruciating curiosity propels us along; meanwhile, Ishiguro's careful, understated narration focuses on the way young people make a life out of whatever is on offer. Nothing is more heartbreaking than received wisdom, and Hailsham students, carefully sheltered not just from any real understanding of their fate but from any real understanding of the world in which it will be acted out, have nothing else to go on.

Their sense of suspension, in a present where they neither make nor understand the rules, is pervasive. Childishly snobbish about the proprieties, they're as puzzled by what's proper as anyone else. Small fashions of behaviour come and go. Far into adulthood Kathy, Tommy and Ruth dissimulate and bicker and set teenage behavioural traps for one another.

Inevitably, it being set in an alternate Britain, in an alternate 1990s, this novel will be described as science fiction. But there's no science here. How are the clones kept alive once they've begun 'donating'? Who can afford this kind of medicine, in a society the author depicts as no richer, indeed perhaps less rich, than ours?

Ishiguro's refusal to consider questions such as these forces his story into a pure rhetorical space. You read by pawing constantly at the text, turning it over in your hands, looking for some vital seam or row of rivets. Precisely how naturalistic is it supposed to be? Precisely how parabolic? Receiving no answer, you're thrown back on the obvious explanation: the novel is about its own moral position on cloning. But that position has been visited before (one thinks immediately of Michael Marshall Smith's savage 1996 offering, *Spares*). There's nothing new here; there's nothing all that startling; and there certainly isn't anything to argue with. Who on earth could be 'for' the exploitation of human beings in this way?

Ishiguro's contribution to the cloning debate turns out to be sleight of hand, eye candy, cover for his pathological need to be subtle. So what is *Never Let Me Go* really about? It's about the steady erosion of hope. It's about repressing what you know, which is that in this life people fail one another, grow old and fall to pieces. It's about knowing that while you must keep calm, keeping calm won't change a thing. Beneath Kathy's flattened and lukewarm emotional landscape lies the pure volcanic turmoil, the unexpressed yet perfectly articulated, perfectly molten rage of the orphan.

By the final, grotesque revelation of what really lies ahead for Kathy and Tommy and Ruth, readers may find themselves full of an energy they don't understand and aren't quite sure how to deploy. *Never Let Me Go* makes you want to have sex, take drugs, run a marathon, dance—anything to convince yourself that you're more alive, more determined, more conscious, more dangerous than any of these characters.

This extraordinary and, in the end, rather frighteningly clever novel isn't about cloning, or being a clone, at all. It's about why we don't explode, why we don't just wake up one day and go sobbing and crying down the street, kicking everything to pieces out of the raw, infuriating, completely personal sense of our lives never having been what they could have been.

When They Were Orphans

Sarah Kerr

New York Times Book Review

There is no way around revealing the premise of Kazuo Ishiguro's new novel. It is brutal, especially for a writer celebrated as a poet of the unspoken. But it takes a while for us to get a handle on it. Since it's the nature of Ishiguro narrators to postpone a full reckoning of their place in the world, all we know in the early going is that we don't quite know what's going on. We have inklings. The novel's 31-year-old narrator, Kathy H, announces on the first page that she has worked for more than 11 years as a 'carer.' The people she assists in her line of work are 'donors' at a recovery centre, in pain and doped up on drugs. Logic suggests that bodily organs are involved. But gently decent Kathy is our host on this journey, and instead of surveying her life in the present (that would be 'England, late 1990's,' according to an introductory note) she likes to let her mind wander back to the years she spent with her two closest friends, Ruth and Tommy, at boarding school—a fabled, bucolic place in the countryside with the Dickens-parody name of Hailsham. Kathy and her classmates were taught to think of themselves as supremely lucky for having gone to Hailsham. It was the best, the most privileged of schools. Still, we can hear off notes. The place was run by 'guardians,' who come across like nuns devoted to a faith other than religion. Both maternally protective and weirdly distant, these women prevented students from leaving the campus, and had them screened each week by a doctor. And they kept the kids busy with art projects that seemed freighted with meaning, as if a child's creative output might hold a clue to her fate. 'Thinking back now,' Kathy says, 'I can see we were just at that age when we knew a few things about ourselves—about who we were, how we were different from our guardians, from the people outside—but hadn't yet understood what any of it meant.' Slowly, we're led to see that she and her classmates are clones, reared in isolation at a special school, pampered and sheltered and encouraged to feel like children for as long as possible but trained for a mean postgraduate destiny. The setup is so shocking—in such a potentially dime-store-novel way—that it's hard to believe at first that it issued from Ishiguro's desktop. Has one of our subtlest observers gone to pulp? The novel is the starkest instance yet of a paradox that has run through all Ishiguro's work. Here is a writer who takes enormous gambles, then uses his superior gifts to

manage the risk as tightly as possible. The question is what he's gambling on. Is he setting up house in a pop genre—the sci-fi thriller—in order to quietly upend its banal conventions, as he did with the manor-house elegy in *The Remains of the Day* and the detective yarn in *When We Were Orphans*? Is he issuing a warning about the ethics of reproductive science?

I suspect about the book Ishiguro's intention is both more personal and more literary. The theme of cloning lets him push to the limit ideas he's nurtured in earlier fiction about memory and the human self; the school's hothouse seclusion makes it an ideal lab for his fascination with cliques, loyalty and friendship. The voice he's written for Kathy H is a feat of imaginative sympathy and technique. He works out intricate ways of showing her naivete, her liabilities as an interpreter of what she sees, but also her deductive smarts, her sensitivity to pain and her need for affection. She has a capacity to grow and love that is heroic under the circumstances. Often quite wittily, Ishiguro shows how the Hailsham kids, cut off from outside contact, manage to fill in the blanks of their world with taboos, jokes, fantasies, fads and paranoid rumours of the unknown. The eeriest feature of this alien world is how familiar it feels. It's like a stripped-down, haiku vision of children everywhere, fending off the chaos of existence by inventing their own rules.

So the dare Ishiguro has taken on might be this: to capture what is unmistakably human, what survives and insists on subtly expressing itself after you subtract the big stuff—the specific baggage, the parents, orientation toward a culture, a past and possible futures—that shapes people into individuals. As Kathy and Ruth and Tommy enter a haunted, attenuated adulthood, their friendship becomes a shifting love triangle. We root for Kathy—which is not quite the same thing as identifying with her. For, authentic as her emotions may be, by definition she's personality-challenged. At times uncomfortably, for a work that aims to give us a distilled and persevering human essence, we can sense the controlling care with which Ishiguro invents and organizes her memories. Yet if the novel feels a bit too distant to move us to outright heartbreak, it delivers images of odd beauty and a mounting existential distress that hangs around long after we read it.

When Ishiguro first rose to literary superstardom, the key to understanding his uncanny, poetically concentrated voice seemed to be his international heritage (he was born in postwar Nagasaki, and raised in England from the age of 6); it helped explain his protagonists' unstable sense of perspective. The new novel puts one in mind of a less remarked fact from his youth. Before becoming a full-time writer in the early 1980's, he spent three years as a social worker, assisting homeless people. In interviews he has described both his idealism during that era and the disillusionment he ultimately felt.

Why is this relevant? Kathy may be the most honest of Ishiguro's protagonists to date, but there are secret-keepers in this novel, and their story and their motives pique our interest too. Late in the book, Kathy and Tommy seek out a couple of their old Hailsham matrons to ask a few questions about who (or what) they were. It's a mischievous scene, charged with both horror-flick suspense and a more complex menace that calls to mind late Henry James. Comfortingly, the moment underlines our understanding that this is a crazy alternate universe: we readers are not raising duplicate human beings for harvest, after all.

Then again, like every society, ours has euphemisms for how we deal with the less fortunate. 'I can see,' one of the guardians, named Miss Emily, tells them, 'that it might look as though you were simply pawns in a game. It can certainly be looked at like that.' What she goes on to say is impossible to describe here without giving away too much. Let's just say that Ishiguro has a way of pitting innocence against experience, while reminding us that we're capable of both.

Suggested points for discussion

📖 The exact function of Hailsham and its students is not revealed for some time but there is an immediate sense that things aren't quite right—discuss the way in which Ishiguro reveals and alludes to the underlying circumstances—consider the use of terms such as 'donation,' 'carer' and 'completed'—do these work as euphemisms or add to the sense of disquietude.

📖 *Never Let Me Go* was borne of Ishiguro's long-held desire to write a novel set around a college. With this in mind, discuss Kathy's relationship with Hailsham, its administrators and her fellow students. Is she overly nostalgic or bitter? How does the book compare with other school-based novels or memoirs? As for the relationships between the students—consider the importance of conformity for instance—are they similar to that of 'normal' adolescents?

📖 How you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at 'creating'. Why was creativity given such a high value at Hailsham? What did it represent to the students?

📖 First person narration is crucial to the novel's unsettling effect. It creates intimacy between narrator and reader. How would your feelings for Kathy differ if it had been written in third person? Is she a reliable narrator? Do you trust her?

📖 How do Madame and Miss Emily react to Kathy and Tommy when they come to request a deferral? Defending her work at Hailsham, Miss Emily says, 'Look at you both now! You've had good lives, you're educated and cultured'. What is revealed in this climactic moment, and how do these revelations affect your reading of the book?

📖 Think of the title *Never Let Me Go*. What is its significance? Why did Ishiguro give such precedence to a song that Kathy favours. When Kathy reminds Madame of the scene in which Madame watched her dancing to the song how is Kathy's version of events different from Madame's?

📖 The teacher Lucy Wainright wanted to make the children more aware of the future that awaited them. Miss Emily believed that in hiding the truth, 'We were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by sheltering you ... Sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you ... But ... we gave you your childhoods'. In the context of the story as a whole, is this a valid argument?

📖 In the novel's final paragraph Kathy describes a flat, windswept field with a barbed wire fence 'where all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled'. She imagines Tommy appearing here in the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up. What does the final sentence indicate about Kathy's state of mind as she faces her losses and her own death—stoicism, denial, courage, resolution?

Suggested further reading

Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro

Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood

The Burrow and *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka

Amsterdam by Ian McEwan

The Plot Against America by Philip Roth

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

Other books by Kazuo Ishiguro

Remains of the Day

When We Were Orphans

A Pale View of Hills

An Artist of the Floating World