

Review of “Never Let Me Go” by Sarah Kerr

“Never Let Me Go’: When They Were Orphans”
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NEVER LET ME GO By Kazuo Ishiguro. 288 pp.
Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.

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 center, 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 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 naïveté, 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 rumors 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.

Sarah Kerr has written about books and culture for The New York Review of Books, Vogue and Slate, among other publications.