

Commentary on “Never Let Me Go” by David Sexton

“Sexton on Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*”
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we are mortal...”

In 1990, even before starting *The Unconsoled*, Kazuo Ishiguro had been working on a project called “The Students’ Novel,” about “these strange young people living in the countryside, calling themselves students where there’s no university.” There was some kind of strange fate hanging over them, he recalled, that was related to nuclear weapons.

“I thought that they were going to come across nuclear weapons that were being moved around at night in huge lorries and be doomed in some way,” resulting in a life span of thirty, rather than eighty, years, he told the *Paris Review*. He could not finish these stories, however. He took the project up again between *The Unconsoled* and his fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans*, published in 2000, but then again abandoned it.

Only around 2001 did the critical idea of dropping the nuclear element and turning instead to cloning come to him. “Around that time, in 2001, there was a lot of stuff about cloning, about stem-cell research, about Dolly the sheep. It was very much in the air,” Ishiguro says. One morning he heard a debate about biotechnology on the radio and seized upon the concept. “I could see a metaphor here. I was looking for a situation to talk about the whole aging process, but in such an odd way that we’d have to look at it all in a new way.” Actually, he added, the novel is hardly about the aging process and certainly not about old age but rather a way of explaining certain aspects of “what

happens to you as you leave childhood, face up to adulthood, and then face up to your own mortality.”

And so *Never Let Me Go* came into being: the story of three friends who grow up in an enclosed environment, a kind of boarding school, only gradually coming to understand that, parentless and unable to have children themselves, they are not considered to be fully human like the people outside, destined for only very brief and restricted lives as adults, before they are required to fulfill the purpose for which they were created, donating their organs, until they die, or, as they call it, they “complete.”

Our realization of the truth about their situation is gradual. There is no startling reveal, no single shocking disclosure of where we are headed. Rather, just as the children themselves only slowly come to understand their fate, so do we as readers only piece together the implications gradually, as we do in life. In fact, the word “clone” appears for the first time only in Chapter 14, in Ruth’s tirade about the students being modeled on “trash,” long after the term will have occurred to the mind of every reader.

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Ostensibly a work of science fiction, *Never Let Me Go* is really nothing of the kind. Ishiguro says he’s perfectly open to people reading it as a chilling warning about biotechnology but feels they’ve missed the inner heart of the book if they take it that way. He has certainly given readers nothing to foster such a misreading. For the book is set in the past, not the future: “England, late 1990s” it is specified before the novel begins.

The narrator, Kathy H, is thirty-one as the book opens, and has been a “carer” for nearly twelve years. She looks back to her time at a school she remains very proud to have attended, Hailsham, recalling first when

she and her friends were children there, and then when they were teenagers, so locating it in the early and later Seventies, perhaps. Then in Part Two, she tells us about their lives afterwards, in “the Cottages” as young adults, perhaps in the early Eighties. But such dating is never precise and there are few contemporary references. There is almost no allusion to technology, beyond humdrum cars, Rovers and Volvos, and old-fashioned cassette tapes and Walkmans.

Almost nothing about the actual biological status of the clones is specified either—neither how they were created, nor how they can make their “donations” and continue for a while to live. Nor are we given any information about changes in society at large. Quite remarkably, there are simply no futuristic, alternative world or science-fiction components to the story. For what this book is about is ordinary, normal and everyday, the knowledge that we are mortal, that our time is limited, death inescapable.

And everything about the way in which it is written, from that absence of technology to the conversational, unremarkable language in which Kathy tells us her story, is calculated to bring it home to us that these are our own lives we are contemplating. In his invariably clear and modest way, Ishiguro describes this radical narrative thus: “The strategy here is that we’re looking at a very strange world, at a very strange group of people, and gradually, I wanted people to feel they’re not looking at such a strange world, that this is everybody’s story.”

As in all Ishiguro’s novels, he never explicitly states the conditions of life he is depicting but asks readers to realize what they are for themselves, to gather much not just from what is said but from what is not said as well. This internalizes the world of the novel for the reader in quite a different way from a more overt telling. His great admirer Hanya Yanagihara has spoken of his “remarkable way of using the white space—a lot

of writers feel they have to say something all at once on the page, they're maximalists and he's not. He's relying on the reader to understand what is happening off the page."

Ishiguro himself compares his ellipticality to that found in songs that contain many more hidden things than the average prose story. "You're going to try to structure the unsaid things as finely and narrowly as you structure the said things. So you often leave out explicit meanings. You deliberately create spaces in the songs for the person listening to inhabit," he told Alan Yentob in a 2021 *Imagine* TV profile. So it becomes your own story—rather as Kathy makes her own interpretation of the song "Never Let Me Go."

It is telling that the very title, so poignant in itself, should be that of an imaginary song—a song asking for the impossible, like Bob Dylan's great invocation of what we may not be, "Forever Young." In that TV program, Ishiguro explained: "Never let me go is an impossible request. You can say, hold on to me for a long time, that's reasonable. But never let me go—you know that what is being asked for, and asked for with great passion and need, is actually ultimately impossible to fulfill, so it's that *never* that really appealed to me. It's that huge human need just for a moment to deny the reality that we will all be parted."

Many readers have testified to the fact that *Never Let Me Go* has a singular way of not just affecting them greatly in their conscious awareness but of becoming part of their unconscious and their own dream-life. One such, as it happens, was the actor Andrew Garfield, who played Tommy in the 2010 film of *Never Let Me Go*.

Interviewed, aged twenty-seven, together with Ishiguro, then fifty-six, just after the film had been made, Garfield admitted he hadn't read the novel before being cast, but that it had affected him deeply when he did read it: "I read the script and the novel

simultaneously and, gosh, it's like you've been stabbed in the back from the first line, but you don't realize it until the last 20 pages. It stays with you and upsets you. You wake up in the morning and you feel okay, then you remember Kazuo's novel and you go, "Oh, God..." On publication of *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro received a postcard from Harold Pinter, who had been involved in the initial development of the script of *The Remains of the Day*, saying, in his black felt-tip: "I found it *bloody* terrifying!"

I myself first read *Never Let Me Go* for review just prior to publication and remember being extremely upset by it. The immediate comparison for me was the shock of reading Pascal as an adolescent and I began the review simply by quoting the famous fragment from the *Pensees*: "Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition."

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As I said then, these few phrases, once read, cannot easily be forgotten, for they express a truth. To Pascal, it is not necessarily the whole truth, because this is man without God. But for those who are without God, it is a pitiless sentence. I finished the review saying the book was "like Pascal's paragraph, no more and no less than an image of man's life, painful to receive, hard to put away." At the time I reported myself dismayed; I was in shock, it seems now to me. After reading the novel I had disturbing dreams in which I seemed to be in its world myself. However, I was in no doubt at all about the book's stature and value.

As it happened, that year, 2005, I had been invited to be a Man Booker judge, a little incongruously since, in my role then as Literary Editor at the London *Evening Standard*, rather than getting soundly behind all such trade promotions as I should have done, I had annually scoffed at its mishaps, mirthfully calling it a literary harvest festival and saying the judges were being asked to choose between an apple and orange and so forth. The Booker was then in its heyday of influence, not yet diffused by the decision to include American writers.

That year an astonishingly large number of good novels were published. Among those on the longlist that did not even make our shortlist were books by Salman Rushdie, Hilary Mantel, Dan Jacobson, and Rachel Cusk. Rejected at that meeting also, much to my surprise, were novels by Ian McEwan (*Saturday*) and J.M. Coetzee (*Slow Man*) that surely would have featured in any other year. The shortlist comprised John Banville (*The Sea*), Julian Barnes (*Arthur & George*), Sebastian Barry (*A Long Long Way*), Ali Smith (*The Accidental*), Zadie Smith (*On Beauty*)—and *Never Let Me Go*.

I had long admired Ishiguro at this point. I had reviewed several of his novels and I had interviewed him relatively early in his career, shortly before *An Artist of the Floating World* was published, in February 1986, for the *Literary Review*. At the time I wrote there regularly, prized not only for my rare critical acumen but because, on taking office, the editor Auberon Waugh had promised the magazine's readers that there would be SEX on every cover and my byline helped out with that rash pledge.

Nonetheless, the interview, in which I asked Ishiguro a great deal about his Japanese heritage, did not appear until January 1987, because it turned out that Bron Waugh, perhaps honoring his father's prejudices, did not believe a Japanese author could

possibly write English and was only persuaded otherwise after the novel had won praise and prizes.

Before the final Booker judging process began, I read *Never Let Me Go* for the second time, on a day-long ferry from St. Malo to Portsmouth, and was taken by it all the more, although reduced to tears. So, despite the strong competition, I felt sure that Ishiguro should and would win. But at the meeting to decide on the day of the prize there was deadlock. Lindsay Duguid, longtime fiction review editor at the *TLS*, backed Ishiguro too. But the forceful writer and bookseller Rick Gekoski strongly supported the Banville, and he was backed by the Irish novelist Josephine Hart. The discussion was protracted as long as possible that afternoon but ended with no resolution.

Finally we reconvened at a room in the Guildhall, shortly before the ceremony was to begin. The chair of the judges, until then not showing his hand, Professor John Sutherland, asked us whether, if he cast the deciding vote, we would all abide by it. We had got on well, time was up. We all said we would. Then Banville wins, he said. The next day Boyd Tonkin of the *Independent* wrote: “Yesterday the Man Booker judges made possibly the worst, certainly the most perverse, and perhaps the most indefensible choice in the 36-year history of the contest.” I think he was right.

It can only have been a slight career hiccup to Ishiguro. He has always said he had “one of the easiest rides any author can have in recent English literary terms,” helped both by good reviews and by winning, or being shortlisted for, prizes with each book. “I’ve been fantastically lucky,” he has said. “Especially as I’ve made very few concessions to commercialism, so I couldn’t complain for one moment.” *Never Let Me Go* has now sold well over two million copies, been translated into many languages, and become a GCSE set text.

Ishiguro won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017 and in 2018 he was knighted for services to literature. Sir Kazuo holds Japan's Order of the Rising Sun, 2nd Class, Gold and Silver Star, too. Still, it was the wrong decision, one I felt abashed about having endorsed every time I saw somebody earnestly reading *The Sea* on the tube, on the bus, in the following months.

In a rapidly written article, Rick Gekoski (later, incidentally, in 2015, instrumental in selling Ishiguro's literary archive to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas for \$1m) defended our decision in the *Times* in a piece headed "At last, the best Booker book won." Gekoski acknowledged John Banville's *The Sea* had been pre-eminently his choice, calling it "one of the few submitted novels worth reading for the quality of the prose itself, which both demanded and repaid re-reading, spreading out in implication and richness the more one contemplated it." He had read the book five times before the final meeting, he said, enjoying it more each time. It was "a complex, deeply textured book, with wonderful, sinuous and sensuous prose" in the high modernist tradition of Nabokov and Beckett.

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One of the repeated criticisms of Ishiguro's work remains that the prose is plain and flat. Revisiting *Never Let Me Go*, Rachel Cusk termed it his "'dead hand' approach." In a peculiarly dim review of *Never Let Me Go* in the *London Review of Books*, Frank Kermode recognized that the prose was appropriate to the character of Kathy but found the writing less engaging than in Ishiguro's previous books: "Everything is expertly arranged, as it always is in Ishiguro, but this dear-diary prose surely reduces one's interest."

Ishiguro has himself pointed out how different his writing is from that of his more demonstrative

contemporaries. “I can’t write those marvelous sentences, like Martin Amis or Salman Rushdie, that crackle with vitality. I do get a great writerly kick out of reading writers at that sentence level, but I suppose I only respect novelists who have a powerful overall vision. I like novelists who can create other interesting worlds.”

From so courteous a man, that’s quite a kick. As a writer I think I’m almost the antithesis [of Rushdie],” he has even said. “The language I use tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning and tries to hide away meaning rather than chase after something just beyond the reach of words. I’m interested in the way words hide meaning.”

He owns that his relationship to the English language “has always been a slightly less secure one than would be the case for someone who was brought up entirely by English parents.” But if he does write a “careful, cautious English,” it is, he says, no bad thing perhaps, citing the example of Beckett, who chose to write in French because it disciplined him. “It is very easy for your own mastery of the language, your familiarity with the language to actually undermine your artistic intentions.”

At times, Ishiguro, a worker-hero of world book tours, has stated that he quite deliberately writes novels for international audiences and so has become hyper-conscious of what does not translate (he’s “haunted by the Norwegians,” he jokes). But he is selling himself short here. Having previously told one of his repeat interviewers, Bryan Appleyard, this, he told him recently, rather more suggestively: “The surface of my writing has to be simple, otherwise I become incomprehensible.”

In an encounter with the Japanese novelist Kenzaburo Oe, he explained: “There’s a surface quietness to my books... But for me, they’re not quiet books, because they’re books that deal with things that

disturb me the most and questions that worry me the most. They're anything but quiet to me.”