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## Haruki Murakami: The Art of Fiction, No. 182

*Interviewed by John Wray*

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Haruki Murakami is not only arguably the most experimental Japanese novelist to have been translated into English, he is also the most popular, with sales in the millions worldwide. His greatest novels inhabit the liminal zone between realism and fable, whodunit and science fiction: *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, for example, features a protagonist who is literally of two minds, and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, perhaps his best-known work outside of Japan, begins prosaically—as a man’s search for his missing wife—then quietly mutates into the strangest hybrid narrative since Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Murakami’s world is an allegorical one, constructed of familiar symbols—an empty well, an underground city—but the meaning of those symbols remains hermetic to the last. His debt to popular culture (and American pop culture, in particular) notwithstanding, it could be argued that no author’s body of work has ever been more private.

Murakami was born in 1949 in Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital, to a middle-class family with a vested interest in the national culture: his father was a teacher of Japanese literature, his grandfather a Buddhist monk. When he was two, his family moved to Kobe, and it was this bustling port city, with its steady stream of foreigners (especially American sailors), that most clearly shaped his sensibility. Rejecting Japanese literature, art, and music at an early age, Murakami came to identify more and more closely with the world outside Japan, a world he knew only through jazz records, Hollywood movies, and dime-store paperbacks.

As a student in Tokyo in the late sixties, Murakami developed a taste for postmodern fiction while looking on, quietly but sympathetically, as the protest movement reached its high-water mark. He married at twenty-three and spent the next several years of his life running a jazz club in Tokyo, Peter Cat, before the publication of his first novel made it possible for him to pay his way by writing. The novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, translated into English but not available outside Japan at the author's request, won him the coveted Gunzo Literature Prize and the beginnings of a readership. With each book that followed, his acclaim and popularity grew, until the publication in 1987 of his first realistic novel, *Norwegian Wood*, transformed him into a literary megastar and the de facto "voice of his generation"—eighties' Japan's version of J. D. Salinger. The book has sold more than two million copies in Japan alone, the equivalent of one for every household in Tokyo.

Since then Murakami has been an unwilling celebrity in his native country, living abroad for years at a time to secure a measure of distance from his public image. He has lived both in Europe and the U.S.; *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, for example, was written while teaching at Princeton and Tufts. Though he has never returned to the straightforward lyricism of *Norwegian Wood*, his novels continue to find an ever wider audience—his new novel *Kafka on the Shore* has already sold three thousand copies in Japan and is due out in English later this year. Internationally, Murakami is now the most widely-read Japanese novelist of his generation; he has won virtually every prize Japan has to offer, including its greatest, the Yomiuri Literary Prize. He is also an extremely active translator, having brought writers as diverse as Raymond Carver, Tim O'Brien, and F. Scott Fitzgerald to Japanese readers, many of them for the first time.

Murakami's office sits just off the main drag in boutique-choked Aoyama, Tokyo's equivalent of New York City's SoHo. The building itself is squat and dated-looking, as though the change in the neighborhood had happened without its permission. Murakami rents a moderate-sized suite on the building's sixth floor, and his rooms give much the same impression: plain wooden cabinets, swivel chairs, Mylar-covered desks—office furniture, in short. The decor seems both deeply incongruous with the notion of a writer's studio and at the same time

somehow fitting: his characters are often in just such an everyday environment when the dream world first beckons to them. As it turns out, although he writes there on occasion, the office's main function is as the nerve center for the business end of Murakami's career. The air hums with polite industry. No fewer than two assistants glide capably about in dainty stockinged feet.

Throughout the following interview, which took place over two consecutive afternoons, he showed a readiness to laugh that was pleasantly out of keeping with the quiet of the office. He's clearly a busy man and by his own admission a reluctant talker, but once serious conversation began I found him focused and forthcoming. He spoke fluently, but with extended pauses between statements, taking great care to give the most accurate answer possible. When the talk turned to jazz or to running marathons, two of his great passions, he could easily have been mistaken for a man twenty years younger, or even for a fifteen-year-old boy.

#### INTERVIEWER

I've just read *After the Quake*, your newest story collection and I found it interesting how freely you mixed stories that were realistic, in the style of your novel *Norwegian Wood*, let's say, with others that had more in common with *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* or *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. Do you see a fundamental difference between those two forms?

#### HARUKI MURAKAMI

My style, what I think of as my style, is very close to *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*. I don't like the realistic style, myself. I prefer a more surrealistic style. But with *Norwegian Wood*, I made up my mind to write a hundred percent realistic novel. I needed that experience.

#### INTERVIEWER

Did you think of that book as an exercise in style or did you have a specific story to tell that was best told realistically?

#### MURAKAMI

I could have been a cult writer if I'd kept writing surrealistic novels. But I wanted to break into the mainstream, so I had to prove that I could write a realistic book. That's why I wrote that book. It was a best-seller in Japan and I expected that result.

INTERVIEWER

So it was actually a strategic choice.

MURAKAMI

That's right. *Norwegian Wood* is very easy to read and easy to understand. Many people liked that book. They might then be interested in my other work; so it helps a lot.

INTERVIEWER

So Japanese readers are like American readers? They want an easy story.

MURAKAMI

My latest book, *Kafka on the Shore*, sold three hundred thousand sets—it's in two volumes here, you know. I was surprised that it sold that many; that's no ordinary thing. The story is very complicated and very hard to follow. But my style, my prose, is very easy to read. It contains a sense of humor, it's dramatic, and it's a page-turner. There's a sort of magic balance between those two factors; perhaps that's another reason for my success. Still, it's incredible. I write a novel every three or four years, and people are waiting for it. I once interviewed John Irving, and he told me that reading a good book is a mainline. Once they are addicted, they're always waiting.

INTERVIEWER

You want to turn your readers into junkies.

MURAKAMI

That's what John Irving said.

INTERVIEWER

Those two factors—a straightforward, easy-to-follow narrative voice paired with an often bewildering plot—is that a conscious choice?

MURAKAMI

No, it's not. When I start to write, I don't have any plan at all. I just wait for the story to come. I don't choose what kind of story it is or what's going to happen. I

just wait. *Norwegian Wood* is a different thing, because I decided to write in a realistic style. But basically, I cannot choose.

INTERVIEWER

But do you choose the voice that it's told in, that deadpan, easy-to-follow voice? Do you choose that?

MURAKAMI

I get some images and I connect one piece to another. That's the story line. Then I explain the story line to the reader. You should be very kind when you explain something. If you think, It's okay; *I* know that, it's a very arrogant thing. Easy words and good metaphors; good allegory. So that's what I do. I explain very carefully and clearly.

INTERVIEWER

Does that come naturally for you?

MURAKAMI

I'm not intelligent. I'm not arrogant. I'm just like the people who read my books. I used to have a jazz club, and I made the cocktails and I made the sandwiches. I didn't want to become a writer—it just happened. It's a kind of gift, you know, from the heavens. So I think I should be very humble.

INTERVIEWER

At what age did you become a writer? Was it a surprise to you?

MURAKAMI

When I was twenty-nine years old. Oh yes, it was a surprise. But I got used to it instantly.

INTERVIEWER

Instantly? From the first day of writing you felt comfortable?

MURAKAMI

I started writing at the kitchen table after midnight. It took ten months to finish that first book; I sent it to a publisher and I got some kind of prize, so it was like a

dream—I was surprised to find it happening. But after a moment, I thought, Yes, it's happened and I'm a writer; why not? It's that simple.

INTERVIEWER

How did your wife feel about your decision to start writing?

MURAKAMI

She didn't say anything at all; and when I said, I'm a writer, she was surprised and kind of embarrassed.

INTERVIEWER

Why was she embarrassed? Did she think you wouldn't make it?

MURAKAMI

To become a writer is kind of flashy.

INTERVIEWER

Who were your models? What Japanese writers influenced you?

MURAKAMI

I didn't read many Japanese writers when I was a child or even in my teens. I wanted to escape from this culture; I felt it was boring. Too sticky.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't your father a teacher of Japanese literature?

MURAKAMI

Right. So it was the father-son relationship too. I just went toward Western culture: jazz music and Dostoevsky and Kafka and Raymond Chandler. That was my own world, my fantasyland. I could go to St. Petersburg or West Hollywood if I wanted. That's the power of the novel—you can go anywhere. Now it's easy to go to the States—everyone can go anywhere in the world—but in the 1960s it was almost impossible. So I just read and listened to the music and I could go there. It was a kind of state of mind, like a dream.

INTERVIEWER

And that led at some point to writing.

MURAKAMI

Right. When I was twenty-nine, I just started to write a novel out of the blue. I wanted to write something, but I didn't know how. I didn't know how to write in Japanese—I'd read almost nothing of the works of Japanese writers—so I borrowed the style, structure, everything, from the books I had read—American books or Western books. As a result, I made my own original style. So it was a beginning.

INTERVIEWER

Your first book was published, you won a prize and were more or less on your way. Did you begin to meet other writers?

MURAKAMI

No, not at all.

INTERVIEWER

You had no friends who were writers at that time?

MURAKAMI

None.

INTERVIEWER

And over time did you meet anyone who became a friend or a colleague?

MURAKAMI

No, not at all.

INTERVIEWER

To this day, you have no friends who are writers?



MURAKAMI

No. I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER

Is there no one you show your work to when it's in progress?

MURAKAMI

Never.

INTERVIEWER

How about your wife?

MURAKAMI

Well, I showed the first manuscript of my first novel but she claims she never read it! So she got no impression at all, I guess.

INTERVIEWER

She wasn't impressed.

MURAKAMI

No. But that was the first draft and it was terrible. I rewrote and rewrote.

INTERVIEWER

Now when you're working on a book is she ever curious what you're writing?

MURAKAMI

She's my first reader, every time I write a book. I rely on her. She's a kind of partner to me. It's like Scott Fitzgerald—for him, Zelda was the first reader.

INTERVIEWER

So you've never felt, at any point in your career, that you were part of any community of writers?

MURAKAMI

I'm a loner. I don't like groups, schools, literary circles. At Princeton, there was a luncheonette, or something like that, and I was invited to eat there. Joyce Carol Oates was there and Toni Morrison was there and I was so afraid, I couldn't eat anything at all! Mary Morris was there and she's a very nice person, almost the same age as I am, and we became friends, I would say. But in Japan I don't have any writer friends, because I just want to have . . . distance.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote a significant portion of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* in the U.S. Did living there have any clear effect on your writing process or on the text itself?

MURAKAMI

During the four years of writing *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, I was living in the U.S. as a stranger. That "strangeness" was always following me like a shadow and it did the same to the protagonist of the novel. Come to think of it, if I wrote it in Japan, it might have become a very different book.

My strangeness while living in the U.S. differed from the strangeness I feel while in Japan. It was more obvious and direct in the U.S. and that gave me a much clearer recognition of myself. The process of writing this novel was a process similar to making myself naked, in a way.

INTERVIEWER

Are there people currently writing in Japan whose books you read and enjoy?

MURAKAMI

Yes, some of them. Ryu Murakami. Banana Yoshimoto—some of her books I like. But I don't do any reviews or critiques; I don't want to be involved in that.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

MURAKAMI

I think that my job is to observe people and the world, and not to judge them. I always hope to position myself away from so-called conclusions. I would like to leave everything wide open to all the possibilities in the world.

I prefer translating to criticism, because you are hardly required to judge anything when you translate. Line by line, I just let my favorite work pass through my body and my mind. We need critiques in this world, for sure, but it's just not my job.

INTERVIEWER

Getting back to your own books: hard-boiled American detective fiction has clearly been a valuable resource. When were you exposed to the genre and who turned you on to it?

MURAKAMI

As a high-school student, I fell in love with crime novels. I was living in Kobe, which is a port city where many foreigners and sailors used to come and sell their paperbacks to the secondhand bookshops. I was poor, but I could buy paperbacks cheaply. I learned to read English from those books and that was so exciting.

INTERVIEWER

What was the first book you read in English?

MURAKAMI

*The Name Is Archer*, by Ross MacDonal. I learned a lot of things from those books. Once I started, I couldn't stop. At the same time I also loved to read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Those books are also page-turners; they're very long, but I couldn't stop reading. So for me it's the same thing, Dostoevsky and Raymond Chandler. Even now, my ideal for writing fiction is to put Dostoevsky and Chandler together in one book. That's my goal.

INTERVIEWER

At what age did you first read Kafka?

MURAKAMI

When I was fifteen. I read *The Castle*; that was a great book. And *The Trial*.

INTERVIEWER

That's interesting. Both those novels were left unfinished, which of course means that they never resolve; your novels too—particularly your more recent books, like *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*—often seem to resist a resolution of the kind that the reader is perhaps expecting. Could that in any way be due to Kafka's influence?

MURAKAMI

Not solely. You've read Raymond Chandler, of course. His books don't really offer conclusions. He might say, He is the killer, but it doesn't matter to me who did it. There was a very interesting episode when Howard Hawks made a picture of *The Big Sleep*. Hawks couldn't understand who killed the chauffeur, so he called Chandler and asked, and Chandler answered, I don't care! Same for me. *Conclusion* means nothing at all. I don't care who the killer is in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

INTERVIEWER

And yet the desire to find out who killed the chauffeur is part of what makes *The Big Sleep* a page-turner.

MURAKAMI

I myself, as I'm writing, don't know who did it. The readers and I are on the same ground. When I start to write a story, I don't know the conclusion at all and I don't know what's going to happen next. If there is a murder case as the first thing, I don't know who the killer is. I write the book because I would like to find out. If I know who the killer is, there's no purpose to writing the story.

INTERVIEWER

Is there also a sense of not wanting to explain your books, in the way a dream loses its power when it comes under analysis?

MURAKAMI

The good thing about writing books is that you can dream while you are awake. If it's a real dream, you cannot control it. When writing the book, you are awake; you can choose the time, the length, everything. I write for four or five hours in the morning and when the time comes, I stop. I can continue the next day. If it's a real dream, you can't do that.

INTERVIEWER

You say that you don't know who the killer is as you're writing, but a possible exception occurs to me: the character of Gotanda in *Dance Dance Dance*. There's a certain deliberate buildup in that novel toward the moment at which Gotanda makes his confession—in classic crime-novel style, he's presented to us as the last person to suspect. Did you not perhaps know that Gotanda was guilty in advance?

MURAKAMI

In the first draft I didn't know it was Gotanda. Closer to the end—two-thirds in or so—I knew. When I wrote the second draft I rewrote the Gotanda scenes, knowing it was him.

INTERVIEWER

Is that one of the main purposes of revision, then—to take what you've learned from the end of the first draft and rework the earlier sections to give a certain feeling of inevitability?

MURAKAMI

That's right. The first draft is messy; I have to revise and revise.

INTERVIEWER

How many drafts do you generally go through?

MURAKAMI

Four or five. I spend six months writing the first draft and then spend seven or eight months rewriting.

INTERVIEWER

That's pretty fast.

MURAKAMI

I'm a hard worker. I concentrate on my work very hard. So, you know, it's easy. And I don't do anything but write my fiction when I write.

INTERVIEWER

How is your typical workday structured?

MURAKAMI

When I'm in writing mode for a novel, I get up at four a.m. and work for five to six hours. In the afternoon, I run for ten kilometers or swim for fifteen hundred meters (or do both), then I read a bit and listen to some music. I go to bed at nine p.m. I keep to this routine every day without variation. The repetition itself

becomes the important thing; it's a form of mesmerism. I mesmerize myself to reach a deeper state of mind. But to hold to such repetition for so long—six months to a year—requires a good amount of mental and physical strength. In that sense, writing a long novel is like survival training. Physical strength is as necessary as artistic sensitivity.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask about your characters. How real do they become to you as you work? Is it important to you that they have a life independent of the narrative?

MURAKAMI

When I make up the characters in my books, I like to observe the real people in my life. I don't like to talk much; I like to listen to other people's stories. I don't decide what kind of people they are; I just try to think about what they feel, where they are going. I gather some factors from him, some factors from her. I don't know if this is "realistic" or "unrealistic," but for me, my characters are more real than real people. In those six or seven months that I'm writing, those people are inside me. It's a kind of cosmos.

INTERVIEWER

Your protagonists often seem to serve as projections of your own point of view into the fantastic world of your narratives—the dreamer in the dream.

MURAKAMI

Please think about it this way: I have a twin brother. And when I was two years old, one of us—the other one—was kidnapped. He was brought to a faraway place and we haven't seen each other since. I think my protagonist is him. A part of myself, but not me, and we haven't seen each other for a long time. It's a kind of alternative form of myself. In terms of DNA, we are the same, but our environment has been different. So our way of thinking would be different. Every time I write a book I put my feet in different shoes. Because sometimes I am tired of being myself. This way I can escape. It's a fantasy. If you can't have a fantasy, what's the point of writing a book?

INTERVIEWER

Another question about *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*. It has a certain symmetry to it, a certain formal quality, and also a sense of resolution that sets it apart from later

books such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, for example. Did your ideas on the function and importance of structure in the novel change at some point?

MURAKAMI

Yes. My first two books have not been published outside of Japan; I didn't want them to be. They're immature works, I think—very small books. They were flimsy, if that's the right word.

INTERVIEWER

What were their shortcomings?

MURAKAMI

What I was trying to do in my first two books was to deconstruct the traditional Japanese novel. By *deconstruct*, I mean remove everything inside, leaving only the framework. Then I had to fill the framework in with something fresh and original. I discovered how to do it successfully only after my third book, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, in 1982. The first two novels were helpful in the learning process—no more than that. I consider *A Wild Sheep Chase* to be the true beginning of my style.

Since then, my books have gotten bigger and bigger; their structures are more complicated. Every time I write a new book, I like to destroy the former structure, to make up a new thing. And I always put a new theme, or a new restriction, or a new vision into the new book. I'm always conscious of the structure. If I change the structure, I have to change the style of my prose and I have to change the characters accordingly. If I did the same thing each time, I would be tired. I'd get bored.

INTERVIEWER

And yet as much as some elements of your writing have changed, others have endured. Your novels are always told in the first person. In each of them, a man cycles between a variety of sexually charged relationships with women; he is generally passive vis-à-vis these women, who seem to function as manifestations of his fears and fantasies.

MURAKAMI

In my books and stories, women are mediums, in a sense; the function of the medium is to make something happen through herself. It's a kind of system to be

experienced. The protagonist is always led somewhere by the medium and the visions that he sees are shown to him by her.

INTERVIEWER

Mediums in the Victorian sense? Psychic mediums?

MURAKAMI

I think sex is an act of . . . a kind of soul-commitment. If the sex is good, your injury will be healed, your imagination will be invigorated. It's a kind of passage to the upper area, to the better place. In that sense, in my stories, women are mediums—harbingers of the coming world. That's why they always come to my protagonist; he doesn't go to them.

INTERVIEWER

There seem to be two distinct types of women in your novels: those with whom the protagonist has a fundamentally serious relationship—often this is the woman who disappears and whose memory haunts him—and the other kind of woman, who comes later and helps him in his search, or to do the opposite—to forget. This second type of woman tends to be outspoken, eccentric, and sexually frank, and the protagonist interacts with her in a much warmer and more humorous way than he had with the missing woman, with whom he never quite connected. What purpose do these two archetypes serve?

MURAKAMI

My protagonist is almost always caught between the spiritual world and the real world. In the spiritual world, the women—or men—are quiet, intelligent, modest. Wise. In the realistic world, as you say, the women are very active, comic, positive. They have a sense of humor. The protagonist's mind is split between these totally different worlds and he cannot choose which to take. I think that's one of the main motifs in my work. It's very apparent in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, in which his mind is actually, physically split. In *Norwegian Wood*, as well, there are two girls and he cannot decide between them, from the beginning to the end.

INTERVIEWER

My sympathies always seem to tend toward the girl with the sense of humor. It's easier to allow the reader into a relationship in which humor is the primary



currency; it's harder to charm the reader with an earnest description of a love affair. In *Norwegian Wood* I was rooting for Midori all the way.

MURAKAMI

I think most readers would say the same. Most would choose Midori. And the protagonist, of course, chooses her in the end. But some part of him is always in the other world and he cannot abandon it. It's a part of him, an essential part. All human beings have a sickness in their minds. That space is a part of them. We have a sane part of our minds and an insane part. We negotiate between those two parts; that is my belief. I can see the insane part of my mind especially well when I'm writing—*insane* is not the right word. Unordinary, unreal. I have to go back to the real world, of course, and pick up the sane part. But if didn't have the insane part, the sick part, I wouldn't be here. In other words, the protagonist is supported by two women; without either of them, he could not go on. In that sense, *Norwegian Wood* is a very straightforward example of what I'm doing.

INTERVIEWER

The character of Reiko in *Norwegian Wood* is interesting in that light. I wouldn't quite know where to put her; she seems to have a foot in both worlds.

MURAKAMI

She has a half-sane, half-insane mind. It's a Greek mask: if you see her from this side, she's a tragic character; if you see her from the other side, she's comic. In that sense, she's very symbolic. I like that character very much. I was happy when I wrote her, Reiko-San.

INTERVIEWER

Do you yourself feel more affection for your comic characters—for your Midoris and May Kasaharas—than you do for your Naokos?

MURAKAMI

I like to write comic dialogue; it's fun. But if my characters were all comic it would be boring. Those comic characters are a kind of stabilizer to my mind; a sense of humor is a very stable thing. You have to be cool to be humorous. When you're serious, you could be unstable; that's the problem with seriousness. But when you're humorous, you're stable. But you can't fight the war smiling.

## INTERVIEWER

Few novelists have written and rewritten their obsessions so compulsively, I think, as you have. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, *Dance Dance Dance*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and *Sputnik Sweetheart* almost demand to be read as variations on a theme: a man has been abandoned by, or has otherwise lost, the object of his desire, and is drawn by his inability to forget her into a parallel world that seems to offer the possibility of regaining what he has lost, a possibility that life as he (and the reader) knows it can never offer. Would you agree with this characterization?

## MURAKAMI

Yes.

## INTERVIEWER

How central is this obsession to your fiction?

## MURAKAMI

I don't know why I keep writing those things. I find that in John Irving's work, every book of his, there's some person with a body part that's missing. I don't know why he keeps writing about those missing parts; probably he doesn't know himself. For me it's the same thing. My protagonist is always missing something, and he's searching for that missing thing. It's like the Holy Grail, or Philip Marlowe.

## INTERVIEWER

You can't have a detective unless something's missing.

## MURAKAMI

Right. When my protagonist misses something, he has to search for it. He's like Odysseus. He experiences so many strange things in the course of his search . . .

## INTERVIEWER

In the course of trying to come home.

## MURAKAMI

He has to survive those experiences, and in the end he finds what he was searching for. But he is not sure it's the same thing. I think that's the motif of my books. Where do those things come from? I don't know. It fits me. It's the driving power of my stories: missing and searching and finding. And disappointment, a kind of new awareness of the world.

## INTERVIEWER

Disappointment as a rite of passage?

## MURAKAMI

That's right. Experience itself is meaning. The protagonist has changed in the course of his experiences—that's the main thing. Not what he found, but how he changed.

## INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask about the process of translation with regard to your own books. As a translator yourself, you must be aware of the hazards involved. How did you come to choose your translators?

## MURAKAMI

I have three—Alfred Birnbaum, Philip Gabriel, Jay Rubin—and the rule is “first come, first get.” We're friends, so they are very honest. They read my books and one of them thinks, That's great! I'd like to do that. So he takes it. As a translator myself, I know that to be enthusiastic is the main part of a good translation. If someone is a good translator but doesn't like a book so much, that's the end of the story. Translation is very hard work, and it takes time.

## INTERVIEWER

The translators never fight among themselves?

## MURAKAMI

Not really. They have their own preferences; they are different people, with different characters. Regarding *Kafka on the Shore*, Phil liked it and took it. Jay wasn't so enthusiastic. Phil is a very modest, gentle person, and Jay is a very meticulous, precise translator. He's kind of a strong character. Alfred is a kind of bohemian; I don't know where he is right now. He's married to a woman from

Myanmar, and she's an activist. Sometimes they get captured by the government. He's that kind of person. He's kind of free as a translator; he changes the prose sometimes. That's his style.

INTERVIEWER

How do you collaborate with your translators? How does the process work, exactly?

MURAKAMI

They ask me many things when they are translating, and when the first draft is completed, I read it. Sometimes I'll give them some suggestions. The English version of my books is very important; small countries, such as Croatia or Slovenia, translate from the English, not the Japanese. So it must be very precise. But in most countries, they translate from the original Japanese text.

INTERVIEWER

You yourself seem to prefer to translate realists—Carver, Fitzgerald, Irving. Does that reflect your tastes as a reader, or is it helpful to your writing in some way to immerse yourself in something very different?

MURAKAMI

The people I've translated have all written books from which I could learn something. That's the main thing. I learn a lot from the realistic writers. Their work requires a very close reading to translate, and I can see their secrets. If I were to translate postmodern writers like Don DeLillo, John Barth, or Thomas Pynchon, there would be a crash—my insanity against their insanity. I admire their work, of course; but when I translate I choose realists.

INTERVIEWER

Your writing is often talked about as being the most accessible Japanese literature for American readers, to the point that you yourself are described as the most Western of contemporary Japanese authors. I was wondering how you see your relationship to Japanese culture.

MURAKAMI

I don't want to write about foreigners in foreign countries; I want to write about us. I want to write about Japan, about our life here. That's important to me. Many

people say that my style is accessible to Westerners; it might be true, but my stories are my own, and they are not Westernized.

INTERVIEWER

And many of the references that seem so Western to Americans—the Beatles, for example—are an integral part of the Japanese cultural landscape as well.

MURAKAMI

When I write about people eating a McDonald's hamburger, Americans wonder, Why is this character eating a hamburger instead of tofu? But eating a hamburger is very natural to us, an everyday thing.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that your novels portray contemporary urban Japanese life accurately?

MURAKAMI

The way people act, the way people talk, the way people react, the way people think, is very Japanese. No Japanese readers—almost no Japanese readers—complain that my stories are different from our life. I'm trying to write about the Japanese. I want to write about what we are, where we are going, why we are here. That's my theme, I guess.

INTERVIEWER

You've said elsewhere, referring to *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, that you were interested in your father, in what happened to him, and to his entire generation; but there are no father figures in the novel, or indeed almost anywhere in your fiction. Where in the book itself is this interest apparent?

MURAKAMI

Almost all my novels have been written in the first person. The main task of my protagonist is to observe the things happening around him. He sees what he must see, or he is supposed to see, in actual time. If I may say so, he resembles Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*. He is neutral, and in order to maintain his neutrality, he must be free from any kinship, any connection to a vertical family system.

This might be considered my reply to the fact that “family” has played an overly significant role in traditional Japanese literature. I wanted to depict my main character as an independent, absolute individual. His status as an urban dweller has something to do with it too. He is a type of man who chooses freedom and solitude over intimacy and personal bonds.

INTERVIEWER

When I was reading “Super-Frog Saves Tokyo” in your latest collection of stories, in which an enormous subterranean worm living deep under Tokyo threatens it with destruction, I couldn’t help thinking of manga, or the old-style Japanese monster movie. Then there’s also the traditional myth of the giant catfish sleeping in Tokyo Bay that, according to legend, wakes up once every fifty years and causes an earthquake. Do any of these associations make sense to you? How about manga, for example? Do you see a connection to your work?

MURAKAMI

No, I don’t think so. I’m not a great fan of manga comics. I was not influenced by those things.

INTERVIEWER

What about Japanese folklore?

MURAKAMI

When I was a child, I was told many Japanese folktales and old stories. Those stories are critical when you are growing up. That Super-Frog figure, for example, might come from that reservoir of stories. You have your reservoir of American folklore, Germans have theirs, Russians have theirs. But there is also a mutual reservoir we can draw from: *The Little Prince*, McDonald’s, or the Beatles.

INTERVIEWER

The global pop-culture reservoir.

MURAKAMI

Narratives are very important nowadays in writing books. I don’t care about theories. I don’t care about vocabulary. What is important is whether the narrative is good or not. We have a new kind of folklore, as a result of this Internet world. It’s a kind of metaphor. I’ve seen that movie, *The Matrix*—it’s a folktale of the contemporary mind. But everybody here said it’s boring.

## INTERVIEWER

Have you seen Hayao Miyazaki's anime film *Spirited Away*? It seems to me there are certain similarities to your books, in that he also manipulates folk material in contemporary ways. Do you enjoy his movies?

## MURAKAMI

No. I don't like animated movies. I saw just a little part of that movie, but that is not my style. I'm not interested in that kind of thing. When I write my books, I get an image, and that image is so strong.

## INTERVIEWER

Do you go to the movies often?

## MURAKAMI

Oh, yes. All the time. My favorite director is from Finland—Aki Kaurismäki. Every one of his movies I liked. He's way out of the ordinary.

## INTERVIEWER

And funny.

## MURAKAMI

Very funny.

## INTERVIEWER

You said earlier that humor is stabilizing. Is it useful in other ways?

## MURAKAMI

I want my readers to laugh sometimes. Many readers in Japan read my books on the train while commuting. The average salaryman spends two hours a day commuting and he spends those hours reading. That's why my big books are printed in two volumes: They would be too heavy in one. Some people write me letters, complaining that they laugh when they read my books on the train! It's very embarrassing for them. Those are the letters I like most. I know they are laughing, reading my books; that's good. I like to make people laugh every ten pages.

## INTERVIEWER

Is that your secret formula?

## MURAKAMI

I don't calculate. But if I could manage that, it would be good. I liked to read Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Brautigan while I was a college student. They had a sense of humor, and at the same time what they were writing about was serious. I like those kind of books. The first time I read Vonnegut and Brautigan I was shocked to find that there were such books! It was like discovering the New World.

## INTERVIEWER

But you've never been tempted to write something in that vein?

## MURAKAMI

I think this world itself is a kind of comedy, this urban life. TVs with fifty channels, those stupid people in the government—it's a comedy. So I try to be serious, but the harder I try, the more comical I get. We were dead serious when I was nineteen years old, in 1968 and 1969. It was a serious time, and people were very idealistic.

## INTERVIEWER

It's interesting that *Norwegian Wood*, which is set in that time, is perhaps the least comic of your books.

## MURAKAMI

In that sense, our generation is a serious generation. But looking back on those days, it was so comical! It was an ambiguous time. So we—my generation—are used to it, I guess.

## INTERVIEWER

One of the cardinal rules of magic realism is not to call attention to the fantastic elements of the story. You, however, disregard this rule: your characters often comment on the strangeness of the story line, even call the reader's attention to it. What purpose does this serve? Why?



## MURAKAMI

That's a very interesting question. I'd like to think about it . . . Well, I think it's my honest observation of how strange the world is. My protagonists are experiencing what I experience as I write, which is also what the readers experience as they read. Kafka or García Márquez, what they are writing is more literature, in the classical sense. My stories are more actual, more contemporary, more the postmodern experience. Think of it like a movie set, where everything—all the props, the books on the wall, the shelves—is fake. The walls are made of paper. In the classical kind of magic realism, the walls and the books are real. If something is fake in my fiction, I like to say it's fake. I don't want to act as if it's real.

## INTERVIEWER

To continue the metaphor of the movie set, might the pulling back of the camera intend to show the workings of the studio?

## MURAKAMI

I don't want to persuade the reader that it's a real thing; I want to show it as it is. In a sense, I'm telling those readers that it's just a story—it's fake. But when you experience the fake as real, it can be real. It's not easy to explain.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writers offered the real thing; that was their task. In *War and Peace* Tolstoy describes the battleground so closely that the readers believe it's the real thing. But I don't. I'm not pretending it's the real thing. We are living in a fake world; we are watching fake evening news. We are fighting a fake war. Our government is fake. But we find reality in this fake world. So our stories are the same; we are walking through fake scenes, but ourselves, as we walk through these scenes, are real. The situation is real, in the sense that it's a commitment, it's a true relationship. That's what I want to write about.

## INTERVIEWER

In your writing, you return to mundane details time and time again.

## MURAKAMI

I like details very much. Tolstoy wanted to write the total description; my description is focused on a very small area. When you describe the details of small

things, your focus gets closer and closer, and the opposite of Tolstoy happens—it gets more unrealistic. That’s what I want to do.

INTERVIEWER

To take the focus so close that you pass through the zone of realism, and the everyday and the banal becomes strange again?

MURAKAMI

The closer it gets, the less real it gets. That’s my style.

INTERVIEWER

Earlier you mentioned García Márquez and Kafka as writers of literature, in contrast to your own work; do you not think of yourself as a writer of literature?

MURAKAMI

I’m a writer of contemporary literature, which is very different. At the time that Kafka was writing, you had only music, books, and theater; now we have the Internet, movies, rental videos, and so much else. We have so much competition now. The main problem is time: in the nineteenth century, people—I’m talking about the leisure class—had so much time to spend, so they read big books. They went to the opera and sat for three or four hours. But now everyone is so busy, and there is no real leisure class. It’s good to read *Moby-Dick* or Dostoevsky, but people are too busy for that now. So fiction itself has changed drastically—we have to grab people by the neck and pull them in. Contemporary fiction writers are using the techniques of other fields—jazz, video games, everything. I think video games are closer to fiction than anything else these days.

INTERVIEWER

Video games?

MURAKAMI

Yes. I don’t like playing video games myself, but I feel the similarity. Sometimes while I’m writing I feel I’m the designer of a video game, and at the same time, a player. I made up the program, and now I’m in the middle of it; the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing. It’s a kind of detachment. A feeling of a split.

## INTERVIEWER

Is that a way of saying that although you have no idea what is going to happen next as you write, another part of you knows exactly what's coming?

## MURAKAMI

Unconsciously, I guess. When I'm absorbed in writing, I know what the author is feeling and I know what the reader is feeling. That's good—it gives my writing speed. Because I want to know what happens next as much as the reader does. But also you have to stop the current sometimes. If it gets too fast, people get tired and bored. You have to make them stop at a certain point.

## INTERVIEWER

And how do you do that?

## MURAKAMI

I just feel it. I know it's time to stop.

## INTERVIEWER

What about jazz and music in general? How is it useful to you in your work?

## MURAKAMI

I've been listening to jazz since I was thirteen or fourteen years old. Music is a very strong influence: the chords, the melodies, the rhythm, the feeling of the blues are helpful when I write. I wanted to be a musician, but I couldn't play the instruments very well, so I became a writer. Writing a book is just like playing music: first I play the theme, then I improvise, then there is a conclusion, of a kind.

## INTERVIEWER

In a traditional jazz piece the initial theme would be returned to toward the end. Do you return to yours?

## MURAKAMI

Sometimes. Jazz is a journey for me, a mental journey. No different than writing.

INTERVIEWER

Who are your favorite jazz musicians?

MURAKAMI

There are too many! I like Stan Getz and Gerry Mulligan. When I was a teenager, they were the coolest musicians ever. I also like Miles Davis and Charlie Parker, of course. If you ask me who I actually put on the turntable most, then the answer would be Miles from the fifties through the sixties. Miles was always an innovator, a man who kept up with his own revolutions—I admire him greatly.

INTERVIEWER

Do you like Coltrane?

MURAKAMI

Ah, so-so. Sometimes he does too much. Too insistent.

INTERVIEWER

What about other types of music?

MURAKAMI

I like classical music as well, particularly baroque music. And in my new book, *Kafka on the Shore*, the protagonist, the boy, listens to Radiohead and Prince. I was so surprised: some member of Radiohead likes my books!

INTERVIEWER

I'm not surprised.

MURAKAMI

I read the Japanese liner notes for *Kid A* the other day, and he said that he likes my books, and I was so proud.

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell me a little about *Kafka on the Shore*?

MURAKAMI

It's the most complicated book I have ever written, more complicated even than *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. It's almost impossible to explain.

There are two stories that run parallel. My protagonist is a fifteen-year-old boy. His name, his first name, is Kafka. In the other story line, the protagonist is a sixty-year-old man. He's illiterate; he cannot write or read. He's kind of a simpleton, but he can talk to cats. The boy, Kafka, was cursed by his father, an Oedipal kind of curse: you will kill me, your father, and make love with your mother. He escapes from his father, to escape from his curse, and he goes to a faraway place, but he experiences a very strange world, very unrealistic, dreamlike things.

INTERVIEWER

In terms of structure, is it similar to *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, in that it goes back and forth, chapter by chapter, from one story line to the other?

MURAKAMI

Right. At first, I was trying to write the sequel to *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, but I decided to write a totally different story. But the style is very similar. The soul is very similar. The theme is this world and the other world; how you can come and go between them.

INTERVIEWER

I'm very excited to hear that, because *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* is my favorite book of yours.

MURAKAMI

Mine too. It's a very ambitious book, the new one, because the protagonists in my books are always in their twenties or their thirties. This time it's a fifteen year old.

INTERVIEWER

More like Holden Caulfield?

MURAKAMI

That's right. It was kind of exciting to write that story. When I wrote about the boy, I could remember how it was when I was fifteen years old. I think memory is the most important asset of human beings. It's a kind of fuel; it burns and it warms you. My memory is like a chest: There are so many drawers in that chest, and when I want to be a fifteen-year-old boy, I open up a certain drawer and I find the scenery I saw when I was a boy in Kobe. I can smell the air, and I can touch the ground, and I can see the green of the trees. That's why I want to write a book.

INTERVIEWER

To get back to those fifteen-year-old perceptions?

MURAKAMI

For instance. Yes.

INTERVIEWER

How important was growing up in Kobe and not elsewhere in Japan to the style that you developed? Kobe has a reputation as a worldly town, and possibly a bit eccentric.

MURAKAMI

People in Kyoto are stranger than in Kobe! They are surrounded by mountains, so their mentality is different.

INTERVIEWER

But you were born in Kyoto. Is that right?

MURAKAMI

Yes, but when I was two we moved to Kobe. So that is where I'm from. Kobe is by the sea and next to the mountains, on a kind of strip. I don't like Tokyo; it's so flat, so wide, so vast. I don't like it here.

INTERVIEWER

But you live here! I'm sure you could live anywhere you liked.

MURAKAMI

That's because I can be anonymous here. It's the same as in New York. Nobody recognizes me; I could go anywhere. I can take the train and nobody bothers me. I have a house in a small town in the suburbs of Tokyo, and everybody knows me there. Every time I take a walk, I get recognized. And sometimes it's annoying.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned Ryu Murakami earlier. He seems to have a very different agenda as a writer.

MURAKAMI

My style is kind of postmodern; his is more mainstream. But when I read *Coin Locker Babies* for the first time, I was shocked; I decided I would like to write that kind of powerful novel. Then I started to write *A Wild Sheep Chase*. So it's a kind of rivalry.

INTERVIEWER

Are you friends?

MURAKAMI

We've had a good relationship. We are not enemies, at least. He has a very natural, powerful talent. It's as if he has an oil well just beneath the surface. But in my case, my oil was so deep that I had to dig and dig and dig. It was real toil. And it took time to get there. But once I got there, I was strong and confident. My life was systematized. It was good to be digging all the way.

Source: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2/the-art-of-fiction-no-182-haruki-murakami>