

HARUKI MURAKAMI

BY PATRICK SMITH



For a writer who breathes the rarified air of international literary superstardom, Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami (1949–) has become adept at performing that most audacious of balancing acts: remaining a darling of the literary establishment and English graduate students, while injecting irresistible, fun pop into his fiction. Murakami is an engaging storyteller, and his novels mix the mundane with the fantastic—elements that surprise, disturb, confuse, and delight readers in equal measure.

In the last two decades, following his debut in English of his third novel *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1983; translated 1989), Murakami has established himself as one of the most innovative and enigmatic novelists of the new millennium. His analogues in English are many and varied, including the fantastic, the postmodern, and the noir: Kurt Vonnegut, Raymond Carver, Thomas Pynchon, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Philip K. Dick.

Born in Kobe, Japan, in 1949, Murakami grew up steeped in the music of the West, absorbing images of all things American. He became one of the world's most salable literary writers almost by accident, it seems. In his late 20s, after working for years at a Tokyo jazz club, Murakami experienced an epiphany while sitting in the bleachers at his local baseball stadium. The vision—that, despite having no formal training and little previous desire, he could write a novel—resulted in *Hear the Wind Sing* (1979; translated 1987), a critical success in Japan.

A notoriously regimented creator—early to bed, early to rise, repeat, repeat, repeat—Murakami's self-effacing, even reluctant, public persona belies his role as the wise, hip, undisputed messiah of contemporary Japanese literature. He discusses much of that backstory in the running journal-cum-memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (2007), whose title, drawn from one of Carver's famous short stories, suggests Murakami's debt to American fiction and its psychologically intense vignettes.

Reading Murakami can be an exercise in self-control and requires the same sort of discipline that the author exhibits when writing. Occasionally, it's hard not to wonder where the grail is, what the endgame might be with all these intricately threaded plots and heady fusion of story and language.

But serious readers *never* wonder why Murakami has become an international sensation.

By the early 1980s, after having penned *Hear the Wind Sing* and a second novel, the more fantastic *Pinball, 1973* (1980), Murakami wrote what would be his breakout book in the West, *A Wild Sheep Chase*. A clear break from the early style—those first efforts were fairly straightforward narratives, relative to what would come later—the novel marked a point of no return for the author.

And where has Murakami's steadfast refusal to write a "conventional" novel taken readers?

With the publication of *1Q84* (see our review on page 29), an epic, loose refashioning of George Orwell's *1984*, the path has led to "one of the world's most distinctive bodies of work: three decades of addictive weirdness that

falls into an oddly fascinating hole between genres (sci-fi, fantasy, realist, hard-boiled) and cultures (Japan, America)," Sam Anderson writes in a *New York Times* profile of Murakami, "a hole that no writer has ever explored before, or at least nowhere near this deep."

Murakami's work has been translated into more than 20 languages, and he has himself ably translated the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Irving, Raymond Carver, and Tim O'Brien, among others, into Japanese. Published in three volumes to great fanfare—and overwhelming demand—*1Q84* has been packaged in one anvil-sized volume in the United States.

The irony of the supersized U.S. edition of his new novel won't be wasted on Murakami. In fact, that image—the book's bursting at the seams while frantic readers strain to make sense of the fantastic worlds that the author insists don't really exist—probably has a better-than-even shot at winding up in the next novel.

Just the way Murakami would want it. *Bon appétit*. And: *Itadakimasu*.

THE EARLY NOVELS

A Wild Sheep Chase (1989)

By the time Murakami's third novel was published in his native Japan in 1982, the author had discovered the unabashed weirdness that would characterize his fiction. *A Wild Sheep Chase* (translated by Alfred Birnbaum) served as Murakami's introduction to the West in 1989 and signaled the author's inevitable rise in international literary circles.

At the novel's outset—and in typical Murakami fashion—little is known about, well, anything. The unnamed narrator, a public relations flack in his early 30s, his sanity threatened by creeping ennui, falls in love with a model and part-time proofreader who has "a pair of the most bewitching, perfectly formed ears."

Yes, ears.

When the rare, eponymous sheep shows up as an illustration in one of the narrator's pamphlets, a powerful man known only as "the Boss" expresses a great interest in finding the elusive ovis, the Boss's key to immortality. Dark and brooding, the novel's noirish aspects led to its inevitable nickname "The Big Sheep," no doubt causing Raymond Chandler to spin in his grave.

"*A Wild Sheep Chase* by Haruki Murakami is a bold new advance in a category of international fiction that could be called the trans-Pacific novel. ... What makes [the novel] so



appealing is the author's ability to strike common chords between the modern Japanese and American middle classes, especially the younger generation, and to do so in stylish, swinging language." HERBERT MITGANG, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/21/1989

"Readily accessible in translation and immediately engaging, this new Japanese fiction is unprecedentedly Western in its cultural orientation. ... This new Japanese fiction, with its air of global interdependence (and homogeneity?) is charming and sentimental—emotionally about at the level of Jacques Brel's songs years ago." COLIN WALTERS, WASHINGTON TIMES, 10/30/1989

Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World (1985; translated 1991)

This is the middle book of what might be loosely considered the trio of novels that established Murakami's reputation in the West (this view gives short shrift to his other early novels: *Norwegian Wood*, a middle-of-the-road love story and the author's best-selling book in the original Japanese; *Dance, Dance, Dance*; and *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, all solid efforts in their own right). *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* weaves a fabulist tale whose seeming randomness, finally, is the point. The two worlds posited in the novel's title are presented in alternating chapters: the Hard-Boiled Wonderland sequences are a high-tech version of a noir caper that tackles, among many other topics, neuroscience, information theory, and industrial espionage, as well as the narrator's love for a mad scientist's alluring granddaughter; the End of the World sequences come at readers from an entirely different universe, its time and place indistinct, its protagonist a man who translates the dreams of unicorns. The usual cacophony of characters and the barely contained chaos that have become the hallmarks of Murakami's long fiction are here as well, as is the author's uncanny ability to tie together two such disparate story lines.

Less William Gibson than the novel appears to be (in fact, the End of the World sequences read a great deal more like the fabulist work of American writer Steven Millhauser), it falls about two clicks closer to science fiction than the previous work without losing any of the fantastic (read: incongruous and random) stuff that has become Murakami's stock-in-trade. If Jorge Luis Borges had hung out with the Beats in a Tokyo jazz club, he might have come up with a tour de force much like *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*.

"It is a remarkable book in many ways, not least because it is one of the few translated Japanese novels that you can pick up and read without being immediately aware that it is a translation. ... Murakami's writing is relaxed and informal,

and is already closer in feel to some modern Western, especially American, writers than to his own predecessors."

IAIN GRANT, SUNDAY TIMES (LONDON), 9/29/1991

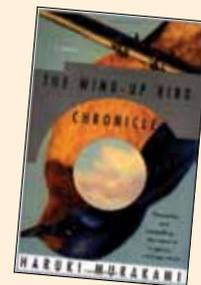
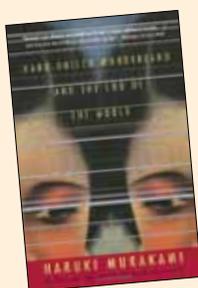
"With his phantasmagoria of swamp-dwelling kappas (a rural, mythical monster) infesting the Tokyo sewers, an underground underworld of gangsters and gumshoes, Italian meals with Japanese ingredients, Bach and Bob Dylan on the tapedeck, Zen puzzles and Zeno's paradoxes, strong overtone of Moorcock and Tolkien, trademarked cars and shaving-foam, the occasional break for a drink and a cigarette, and an end in exhausted slumber and total oblivion, Murakami goes a long way towards the truth of the matter." SIMON REES, INDEPENDENT (LONDON), 10/12/1991

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle (1995; translated 1997)

When Toru Okada's cat goes missing, a chain of events that will turn his life upside down is set in motion. Toru's wife, Kumiko Okada, leaves him, disquieted by her own relationship with her brother, a right-wing politician who despises his feckless brother-in-law, and Toru becomes enmeshed with various eccentric characters—including a psychic hired to find his cat, a faceless woman who tries (unsuccessfully) to engage Toru in phone sex, and Tokutaro Mamiya, an ancient man who was once a lieutenant in the Japanese army that invaded Manchuria in 1931. At the center of the chaos, Toru, who earlier had quit his job as an employee of little consequence at a law firm, wants nothing more than to find his cat, get his wife back, and live his life. Willing to put the pieces back together but hardly knowing where to begin, he takes a clue from Mamiya's poignant, horrifying story and seeks his fortune in a local well. "Everything was intertwined, with the complexity of a three-dimensional puzzle," Toru muses, "a puzzle in which truth was not necessarily fact and fact not necessarily truth."

Although Murakami had proven himself an astute observer to this point in his career, his powers of social commentary—and, perhaps not coincidentally, the lengths of his novels—reach new heights in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. As Murakami becomes more adept at handling the dizzying array of characters and fantastic situations that crop up in his novels, the stories become more seamless and the author's high-wire act even more impressive.

"Haruki Murakami's latest novel, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, is a wildly ambitious book that not only recapitulates the themes, motifs and preoccupations of his earlier work, but also aspires to invest that material with weighty mythic and historical significance. ... Like so many of Mr. Murakami's previous stories, *Wind-Up Bird* is part detective story, part



Bildungsroman, part fairy tale, part science-fiction-meets-Lewis Carroll.” MICHIKO KAKUTANI, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/31/1997

“The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle is a profoundly alarming tale of urban loss in which the unconscious and the dreaming mind have full parts in the hero’s quest to restore the equilibrium of his life. ... Murakami weaves these textured layers of reality into a shot-silk garment of deceptive beauty.” JAMES URQUHART,

INDEPENDENT (LONDON), 5/24/1998

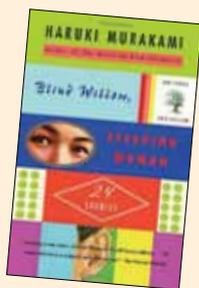
THE SHORT FICTION

In addition to being prolific in the long form, Murakami continues to hone his voice in short vignettes—many of which appeared, originally, in the *New Yorker*. These works are collected in *The Elephant Vanishes* (1991), *after the quake* (2002), and *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2006). Aside from the stories in *after the quake*, which were written in the aftermath of the 1995 Kobe earthquake that claimed 6,000 lives and the attacks shortly thereafter on the Tokyo subway (Murakami published his first nonfiction book, *Underground*, during that period), the collections draw on pieces written at various times throughout Murakami’s career, beginning around 1980, and reflect his changing worldview and growth as a writer.

“To put it in the simplest terms, I find writing novels a challenge, writing short stories a joy,” Murakami offers in the introduction to *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*. “If writing novels is like planting a forest, then writing short stories is more like planting a garden. The two processes complement each other, creating a complete landscape that I treasure.”

Indeed, the poignant closing piece of *after the quake*, “honey pie,” has protagonist Junpei echoing what Murakami may have felt in reliving memories of his earthquake-ravaged home: “I want to write stories that are different from the ones I’ve written so far, Junpei thought: I want to write about people who dream and wait for the night to end, who long for the light so they can hold the ones they love.”

In *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, what he calls his “first real short story collection,” jazz fan Murakami creates a number of bebop literary improvisations more indicative of the fabulist direction his long fiction would take. Stories previously published in the *New Yorker* join other short works dating back more than 20 years. Juxtaposing the real with the surreal (as in “Where I’m Likely to Find



It”), interpersonal distance with social exclusion and emotional absence (“Man-Eating Cats,” later incorporated into the novel *Sputnik Sweetheart*), and fictional narrative with autobiography (“A Folklore for My Generation,” “Nausea 1979,” and “Chance Traveler”), Murakami continues his compelling literary explorations.

“Everything I write is a strange tale,” Murakami maintains. Admittedly, his fusion of Eastern and Western story elements to create a surreal landscape of human and otherworldly experiences may be a little too strange for some readers. In addition, he asks more questions than he answers about his protagonists and their unusual situations. Yet those accustomed to his weird ways will find a lot to enjoy here, including many of his most popular New Yorker pieces. While it’s clear that many of the stories are sketches made in preparation for the grand artistry of his novels, most, if not all, stand very well on their own.

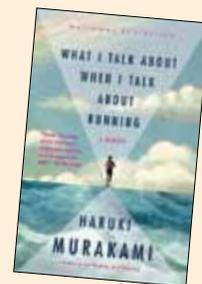
THE MEMOIR

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running (2008)

In the early 1980s, Murakami realized that a sedentary lifestyle and a three-pack-a-day smoking habit would be the end of him. Over the past three decades, the daily running that began as a lifestyle choice has become an obsession. Since then, Murakami has run in more than two dozen marathons, a handful of triathlons, and a 62-mile ultramarathon. “Most of what I know about writing I’ve

learned through running every day,” he writes. In *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*—a play on the title of Raymond Carver’s much-anthologized story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”—the author views his role as writer through the eyes of a runner. “No matter how mundane some action might appear, keep at it long enough and it becomes a contemplative, even meditative act,” Murakami muses in the book’s Foreword. “As a writer, then, and as a runner, I don’t find that writing and publishing a book of my own personal thoughts about running makes me stray too far off my usual path.”

Still, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* couldn’t differ more from Murakami’s fiction. This slender volume catalogs the author’s love for that most solitary of athletic endeavors and offers insight into how his personal life carries over into the creative endeavor. Even Murakami’s prodigious talent as a writer, though, can’t quite bridge the gap between the cultish world of hard-core running and a broader audience. The book should be welcomed by a small (probably athletic) audience, but it may not reach readers



who aren't already on board with Murakami or running.
(★★★ Nov/Dec 2008)

"This charming, sober little book tells the story of how, shortly after Murakami embarked on a career as a novelist, he was blindsided by an even unlikelier idea: to go for a run. ... Runners will find a kindred soul on these pages." JOHN FREEMAN, CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER, 8/3/2008

"The clean, easily accessible style with inclinations toward profundity that marks Murakami's novels is evident here—as is the interest in American pop culture that has earned him a devoted audience of Western readers and a teaching job at Harvard, conveniently located near the banks of the runner-friendly Charles River and the 26.2-mile course of the Boston Marathon. ... [What I Talk About is] no juicy tell-all memoir, but something much more intriguing: a tightly focused window into a defining avocation of one of the world's great novelists." DAN DELUCA, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, 8/17/2008

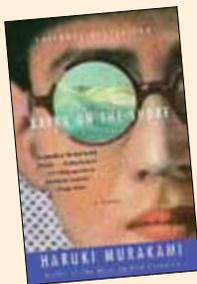
THE LATER FICTION

Kafka on the Shore (2002)

When 15-year-old Kafka Tamura runs away from Tokyo to escape his distant father and an oedipal prophecy, he hopes to find his sister, the mother who abandoned him as a child, and his personal destiny. His story runs parallel to that of Nakata, an old man whose bizarre childhood accident left him "dumb" but whose gifts include speaking with animals. Murakami tells their troubled tales in alternating chapters, revealing their connected lives and fates—for Kafka, "a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions." A gruesome murder, a Johnnie Walker (yes, the distilled spirit) apparition, a sardine rainstorm, a Colonel Sanders look-alike, and some other grisly surprises intervene in the lives of these characters. In this tale of friendship, loneliness, and nonconformity, anything can happen.

As in his earlier work, the author merges Western culture and Japanese history to paint a surreal portrait of two troubled souls searching for—well, something. With Japan's wartime history never far in the distance, the author stresses the value of personal freedom and identity in a confused world. Although Murakami raises serious themes—love, isolation, identity, nonconformity—he has a surprisingly light touch. Perhaps that's what life is, the author suggests: a series of random connections to which we desperately imbue meaning. (★★★ SELECTION Mar/Apr 2005)

"This is at once a coming-of-age novel reminiscent of J. D. Salinger, a metaphysical love story in the tradition of



Wuthering Heights and a philosophical and psychological journey that should entice anyone from the layman to the most elite academic. ... Not since Steinbeck has any writer managed to lift so much of the human psyche and deposit it in one novel." ANNE JOLIS, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, 1/9/2005

"A real page-turner, as well as an insistent metaphysical mind-bender. ... But beneath his feverish, symbolically fraught adventures there is a subconscious pull almost equal to the pull of sex and vital growth: that of nothingness, of emptiness, of blissful blankness." JOHN UPDIKE, NEW YORKER, 1/24/2005

After Dark (2004)

Just before midnight in Tokyo, 19-year-old Mari Asai can't sleep. She seeks refuge in an all-night intending to read, but her solitude is interrupted by Takahashi, a young jazz musician who used to know Mari's older sister, Eri. When a Chinese prostitute is viciously assaulted by a client at a nearby "love hotel," Takahashi leads the hotel's owner to Mari, having just learned that Mari speaks fluent Chinese. Soon Mari and Takahashi are in pursuit of the villain, a bored salaryman named Shirakawa. The alternating stories of Mari and Shirakawa are intermingled with surreal chapters featuring Eri, who has been asleep for two months.

Other than an unexpected cheerfulness, *After Dark* is classic Murakami, featuring themes of loneliness and alienation, carefully crafted characters, Western references (Hall & Oates playing in the background at Denny's, anyone?), and distinctive magical realist twists of fate. Critics praised the impassive, omniscient narration, like a constantly shifting video camera, which renders each scene in magnificent detail. (★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2007)

"This strange, mesmerizing, spell-binding, voyeuristic novel is impossible to put down. ... Murakami in a postmodern sleight-of-hand keeps us aware of his point of view, as if we were cameras looking down from above, peering from odd angles, sweeping in over the city, or retreating into dark corners and silent rooms." SAM COALE, PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, 5/12/2007

"After Dark is a bittersweet novel that will satisfy the most demanding literary taste. It is a sort of neo-noir flick set in half-empty diners, dark streets and hotel rooms straight out of the paintings of Edward Hopper." JUVENAL ACOSTA, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 5/13/2007 ■

