

MURAKAMI



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into his creative process. The result is a revealing self-portrait that
answers many burning questions about its reclusive subject’

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‘This charming collection opens up much of the
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and joy in his long vocation as a novelist’

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Murakami’s astounding mind and method. It shows what
makes Murakami run – on the street and on the page’

Los Angeles Review of Books

‘A true original’

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ALSO BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

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1Q84

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Dance Dance Dance

The Elephant Vanishes

First Person Singular

Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World

Kafka on the Shore

Killing Commendatore

Men Without Women

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South of the Border, West of the Sun

Sputnik Sweetheart

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A Wild Sheep Chase

Wind/Pinball

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle

NON-FICTION

Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa

Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir

Murakami T: The T-Shirts I Love

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HARUKI MURAKAMI

In 1978, Haruki Murakami was twenty-nine and running a jazz bar in downtown Tokyo. One April day, the impulse to write a novel came to him suddenly while watching a baseball game. That first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, won a new writers' award and was published the following year. More followed, including *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, but it was *Norwegian Wood*, published in 1987, that turned Murakami from a writer into a phenomenon.

In works such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *1Q84*, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* and *Men Without Women*, Murakami's distinctive blend of the mysterious and the everyday, of melancholy and humour, continues to enchant readers, ensuring his place as one of the world's most acclaimed and well-loved writers.

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TRANSLATORS

Philip Gabriel is the author of *Mad Wives and Island Dreams: Shimao Toshio and the Margins of Japanese Literature* and *Spirit Matters: The Transcendent in Modern Japanese Literature*, and has translated many novels and short stories by the writer Haruki Murakami and other modern writers. He is recipient of the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature (2001) for his translation of Senji Kuroi's *Life in the Cul-de-Sac*, and the 2006 PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize for his translation of Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*.

Theodore (Ted) Goossen has translated the work of many Japanese writers, most notably Naoya Shiga, Haruki Murakami, and Hiromi Kawakami. He is the editor of *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories* (1997) and the co-editor and founder, with Motoyuki Shibata, of the annual literary journal *Monkey Business* (now *Monkey: new writing from Japan*), which, since 2011, has introduced a new generation of Japanese writers to English-speaking readers. Essays and stories by, as well as interviews with, Murakami are a staple of every issue.

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HARUKI MURAKAMI

Novelist as a Vocation

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Philip Gabriel and Ted Goossen

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FOREWORD

I'm not exactly sure when I began writing the series of essays collected in this volume, but I think it was around 2010.

One thing I need to mention is that this book was published in Japan in 2015, so there is a seven-year time lag between that and the present 2022 English translation. I'd like you to be aware of this. During these past seven years we've experienced all kinds of crucial events, including the Corona pandemic, and wars breaking out around the world. These circumstances have forced us to make some significant changes in our lives. These essays, though, do not reflect those changes, or the individual changes I've experienced myself. They are simply my thoughts and feelings as of 2015.



FOR A LONG TIME I've been wanting to say something about my writing novels, and being a novelist for so long; so in between other work I started, bit by bit, jotting down my thoughts, and organizing them by topic. I didn't write these essays, then, at the request of a publisher, but, rather, on my own initiative, something I wrote for my own sake.

The first several chapters I wrote in my usual style—like how I'm writing here—but when I reread them the flow of the writing seemed stiff and kind of shrill, and it just didn't

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sit well with me. So I tried writing as if I were directly talking to people, and that way it felt easier to write (speak) more smoothly and honestly; and decided to consolidate the whole thing as if I were writing a speech. I pictured myself speaking in a small hall to maybe thirty or forty people, and rewrote the essays in the more intimate tone you'd expect in that kind of setting. Though I never actually had the opportunity to read these essays as talks in front of anyone.

Why not? First of all, I feel a bit embarrassed about talking about myself, and about the process of me writing novels, so directly and openly. I have a pretty strong desire not to try to explain my novels to others. Talking about my own works always comes off sounding kind of apologetic, or boastful, or as if I'm trying to justify myself. Even if I don't want to sound that way, it still leaves that impression.

Well, I imagine that someday I might have the chance to talk about this in public, but it might be a little early for it now. Maybe when I'm a bit older. Thinking this, I tossed the pages I'd written into a drawer. From time to time I'd take them out and rework parts of the manuscript. The situation surrounding me—my personal circumstances, societal circumstances—was gradually changing, as was my way of thinking and feeling about things. In that sense the version I wrote in the beginning and the final version here are very different in feeling and tone. Still, my fundamental stance and way of thinking have hardly changed at all. It almost makes me feel like I've been saying the same things from the time I debuted down to today. When I read what I said over thirty years ago I'm surprised, thinking, "Wow, it's almost exactly what I'm saying now!"

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So I think what's collected here are things I've been writing and saying over and over (though the form may have gradually changed over time). Many readers might think, "Hey, haven't I read that somewhere before?" and if you're one of them I ask your indulgence. Another motivation for publishing these "records of undelivered speeches" was a desire to systematically gather all the things I've said in different places. I'd be pleased if readers would take these as a comprehensive look (at the present time) of my views on writing novels.

The first half of this book was serialized in the magazine *Monkey Business*. Motoyuki Shibata started this new magazine in 2008 (which was to be a new type of more intimate literary journal) and asked me if I'd write something for it. I agreed, and gave him a short story, one I'd just happened to have finished, and a thought occurred to me and I told him, "You know, I have these personal speeches I've written. If you have space, could you serialize them?"

That's how the first six chapters came to be serialized in each monthly issue of *Monkey Business*. An easy task, since all I had to do was turn over for every issue something I already had lying dormant in my drawer. In all there are eleven chapters, the first six, as I've said, serialized in the magazine, the last five written especially for this book.

I imagine this book will be taken as *autobiographical essays*, but they weren't originally written with that in mind. What I was after was to write, in the most concrete and practical way, about the path I've followed as a novelist, and the ideas and thoughts I've had in the process. That said, writing novels is nothing less than expressing yourself, so talk-

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ing about the process of writing means you inevitably have to talk about yourself.

Truthfully, I have no idea if this book could serve as a guidebook or introduction to help those hoping to write novels. What I mean is, I'm the kind of person with a very individual way of thinking, and I don't know how far you can generalize about or apply my way of writing and living. I know hardly any other writers, so I don't know how they write, and I can't make comparisons. For me, this is the only way I can write, so that's how I do it. I'm certainly not advocating this as the best way to write novels. You might be able to apply some things in my methods, but others might not work so well. It goes without saying, but if you take a hundred novelists you'll find a hundred different ways of writing novels. I hope that each of you grasps that and comes to your own conclusions about any applications.

One thing I do want you to understand is that I am, when all is said and done, a *very ordinary person*. I do think I have some innate ability to write novels (if I didn't, I wouldn't have been able to write novels all these many years). But that aside, if I do say so myself, I'm the type of ordinary guy you'll find anywhere. Not the type to stand out when I stroll around town, the type who's always shown to the worst tables at restaurants. I doubt that if I didn't write novels, anyone would ever have noticed me. I would have just lived out an ordinary, nondescript life in a totally ordinary way. In my daily life I'm hardly ever conscious of myself as writer.

But since I do happen to have a bit of ability to write novels, and have had some good luck on my side, plus a stubborn streak (or, to put it more nicely, a consistency) that's proved

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helpful, I've been able, over thirty-five years, to write novels as a profession. To this day it continues to amaze me. It really does. What I've wanted to talk about in this book is that very sense of amazement, about the strong desire (or will, you might say) to hold onto the purity of that feeling of amazement. Perhaps the past thirty-five years of my life have been the ardent pursuit to maintain that sense of amazement. It certainly feels that way.

The last thing I'd like to note is that I'm not the kind of person who is very good at thinking things out purely using my mind. I'm not that good at logical argument or abstract thought. The only way I can think about things in any kind of order is by putting them in writing. Physically moving my hand as I write, rereading what I write, over and over, and closely reworking it—only then am I finally able to gather my thoughts and grasp them like other people do. Because of this, through writing over time what's been gathered in this volume, and rewriting it over and over, I've been able to think more systematically and take a broader view of myself, a novelist, and myself being a novelist.

I wonder, then, how useful this somewhat self-indulgent, personal writing here—less message than record of a personal thought process—will prove to the reader. If it does turn out to be even a little useful in a practical way, I would be very pleased.

(Originally written in June 2015; updated in June 2022)

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Novelist as a Vocation

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Are Novelists Broad-minded?



TALKING ABOUT NOVELS strikes me as too broad and amorphous a topic to get the ball rolling, so I will start by addressing something more specific: novelists. They are concrete and visible, and therefore easier to deal with.

There are exceptions, of course, but from what I have seen, most novelists aren't what one would call amiable and fair-minded. Neither are they what would normally be considered good role models: their dispositions tend to be idiosyncratic and their lifestyles and general behavior frankly odd. Almost all (my guess is 92 percent, including yours truly) live under the unspoken assumption that "my way is right, while virtually all other writers are wrong." I doubt that many of us would want to have much contact with such people, whether as neighbors or—heaven forbid—as friends.

When I hear that two writers are good buddies, I tend to take it with a grain of salt. Sure, I think, those things can happen, but a truly intimate friendship of that sort can't last very long. Writers are basically an egoistic breed, proud and highly competitive. Put two of them in the same room and the result, more likely than not, will be a disappointment. Believe me, I have been in that situation a number of times myself.

One famous example was the 1922 dinner party in Paris that brought together Marcel Proust and James Joyce. They were seated close to each other, and everyone there held their breath to hear what those towering figures of twentieth-century literature would say. Yet in the end everyone's expectations were dashed, for the two barely spoke to each other. I imagine their self-regard was just too great a hurdle to overcome.

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Nevertheless, if the conversation shifts to exclusionary attitudes—simply put, the territorial instinct—among professional groups, it strikes me that few, if any, tribes are as generous and welcoming as novelists. Indeed, I think that may be one of the very few virtues novelists possess.

Let me be a little more specific.

Suppose that a novelist blessed with a good voice makes his or her debut as a singer. Or a novelist with an aptitude for art exhibits paintings. Without a doubt, they would be met with resistance, even ridicule. The critics would go to town. “Stick to what you know!” some would sneer. Others would crow, “An amateurish display, lacking in skill or talent.” Professional singers and artists would likely turn a cold shoulder. Comments might even grow malicious. In any case, a “Welcome to the club!” sort of greeting would be rare on either front. Should a warm reception be proffered, it would doubtless be on a very limited scale in a very restricted venue.

Alongside my own fiction, I have been publishing translations of American literature for thirty years, yet in the beginning (and possibly even now) I was raked over the coals by professionals in the field for doing so. “Literary translation is not for mere amateurs,” shouted a chorus of voices. “Writers who try their hand at translation are just a nuisance.”

Similarly, when I published *Underground*, I was met with harsh criticism from the ranks of professional nonfiction writers: “a display of ignorance of the basic rules of nonfiction”; “a tearjerker of the first order”; “the work of a dilettante.” I had not attempted to write nonfiction per se; rather, I had attempted to produce a work un beholden to any genre that handled “nonfictional” material. Nevertheless, I had stepped on the tails of the tigers who guard

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the sacred sanctuary of nonfiction, and they were angry. I had not known that they existed, or that there were hard-and-fast rules that governed such writing, so at first I was completely bewildered.

As my experience suggests, specialists in a given field tend to frown on those who, for whatever reason, stray onto their turf. Like the white blood cells that protect our bodies from foreign invaders, they repel all “alien” forces. Those who proceed undaunted may find, in the end, that the authorities have relented, and that their admittance has been tacitly approved . . . but in the beginning at least the road is bound to be rocky. The narrower and more specialized the field, I have found, the prouder the authorities tend to be and the stronger their antipathy to outsiders.

BUT WHAT OF the opposite case, when singers or artists or translators or nonfiction writers turn out a novel? Do novelists make a sour face? From my experience, no. To the contrary, we tend to look upon the results positively, and even encourage their authors. Certainly I have never witnessed an established novelist dismiss a first-timer with an angry “What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Nor have I heard of newcomers being insulted or ridiculed or maliciously tripped up by their more experienced brethren. Instead, it is likely that curious senior writers will invite them to discuss their work and possibly offer them advice and encouragement.

This is not to say, of course, that novelists do not say negative things about first novels in private, but they do that about one another’s works all the time, too: indeed, such criticisms are the norm in all workplaces and bear no relation to the desire to repel outside invaders. Novelists are riddled with faults, but that is not

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one of them: as a rule, they are magnanimous with those who step onto their turf, and treat them generously.

Why should that be so?

I think I have a pretty good idea. The thing that makes novels different is that practically anybody can write one if they put their mind to it. A pianist or a ballerina has to go through a process of severe, intensive training from childhood until, finally, they are able to make their debut; an artist has to be equipped with at least a modicum of knowledge and foundational skills, not to mention a full set of tools and other materials. Becoming a mountain climber requires an inordinate amount of physical strength, training, and courage.

An aspiring novelist, by contrast, needs only the basic ability to write (most people have that), a ballpoint pen, a pad of paper, and the capacity to make up a story to turn out something resembling a novel—whether they have received any specialized training is quite beside the point. There is no need to study literature at the university level. It's fine if you've studied creative writing, but just as fine if you haven't.

It's possible for a first-timer to produce a fine novel if he or she is blessed with just a little talent. When I started, for example, I had zero training. True, I had majored in drama and film in university, but times being what they were—it was the late 1960s—I had seldom attended class. Instead, I grew long hair and a scruffy beard and hung around in clothes that were less than clean. I had no special plans to become a writer, never even tried to scribble something down for practice, until one day the bug suddenly bit me and I wrote my first novel (if you want to call it that), *Hear the Wind Sing*, which ended up winning a literary magazine's prize for new writers. I went on to become a professional writer without ever hav-

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ing had to study the craft. “Is this really all right?” I asked myself, shaking my head in wonder. It all seemed way too easy.

This may anger some people. I can hear them squawking, “What the hell do you know about literature?” I’m just trying to tell it like it really is. People can theorize all they want, but when you get right down to it, the novel’s form is extremely broad. Indeed, that very breadth is what helps to generate its amazing, down-to-earth vitality. From where I stand, the statement “Anyone can write a novel” is not slander, but praise.

In short, the world of the novelist is like a professional wrestling ring that welcomes anyone who feels like taking a crack at it. The gap between the ropes is big enough to pass through, and a step is provided to make your entrance easier. The ring is spacious. No security men block your way, and the referee doesn’t bark at you to leave. The wrestlers who are already there—the established novelists, in other words—are at the very least resigned to your presence: “No worries—come on up and take your best shot” is their attitude. The ring is—how shall I put this?—an airy, easy, accommodating, altogether laid-back environment.

While entering the ring may be easy, however, remaining there for long is hard. We novelists are of course aware of this. It’s not that difficult to write a novel, maybe even two. But it’s another thing altogether to keep producing, to live off one’s writing, to survive. That’s a Herculean task. It’s fair to say not many are up to it. To accomplish it, one needs, well, a special something. Talent is important, of course, and backbone. Like so many things in life, luck and fate play a big role, too. But there is something else that is needed, a kind of qualification. Some have it and some don’t. Some possess it from birth while others struggle mightily to acquire it.

Not very much is known about this qualification—indeed, it is

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