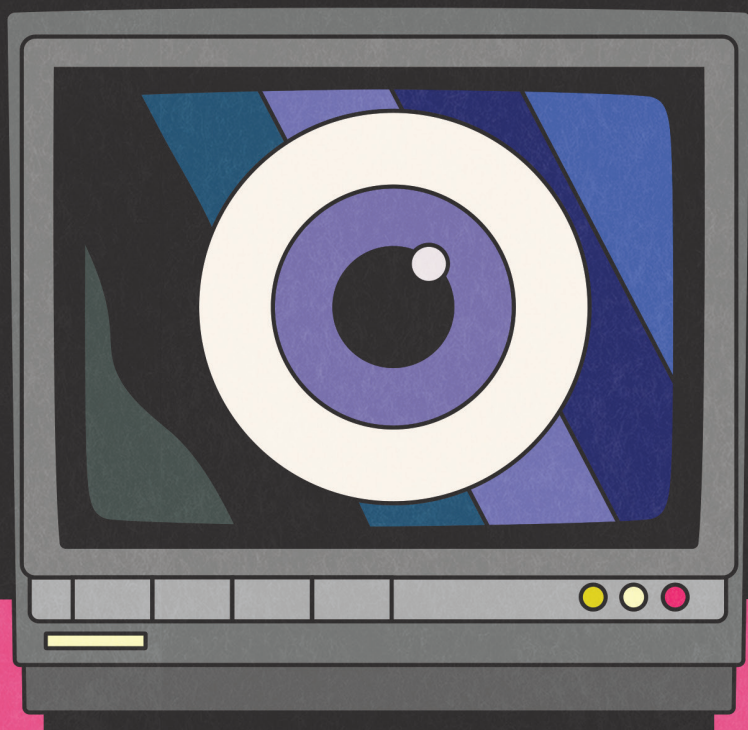


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HARUKI MURAKAMI
AFTER DARK

'The closest Murakami has yet come to
composing a pure tone-poem'
Guardian

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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.

JAY RUBIN

Jay Rubin is a professor of Japanese literature at Harvard University. He is the author of *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words* and he has also translated Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Norwegian Wood*, *After the Quake*, *After Dark*, 1Q84 and an unabridged edition of *End of the World* and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*.

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FICTION

1Q84

After the Quake

Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman

The City and Its Uncertain Walls

Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage

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

Norwegian Wood

South of the Border, West of the Sun

Sputnik Sweetheart

Super-Frog Saves Tokyo

The Strange Library

A Wild Sheep Chase

Wind/Pinball

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle

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

HARUKI MURAKAMI
AFTER DARK

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Jay Rubin

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Vintage, Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

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Random House
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This paperback first published in Vintage Classics in 2026
First published with the title *Afutadaku* by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo, in 2004
First published in Great Britain by Harvill Secker in 2007

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English translation © Harukimurakami Archival Labyrinth 2007

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529982343

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Introduction

The novel *After Dark* (a lengthy medium-size novel, or a shorter long novel) was published in Japan in September, 2004. Looking at the order of my novels, it was after *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), and just before the short story collection *Strange Tales from Tokyo* (2005). I was fifty-five at the time. Afterwards I wrote the long novel *1Q84* (2009).

As you can see, I generally write (1) a lengthy novel, followed by (2) a shorter novel, and then (3) short stories. I can write in different ways, depending on the length. You could say that with each length of work I use a different part of my brain and different muscles. I've used this rotation to continue to write, without pause, for the past forty-plus years.

I think the main feature of *After Dark* is the experimental writing style it was written in. With this length work—one that belongs in category (2), in other words—I always try out something new, technically, in my writing. A work of this length is just the right sized testing ground, and *After Dark* in particular tended to be experimental.

Specifically, I wrote this novel as if I were writing a scenario. Meaning that the story depends mainly on dialogue. In between dialogues I added simple “stage directions.” I didn't spend much time on descriptive passages. This made for a story that moved along briskly, and smoothly. Then all I had to do was add and expand

detailed descriptions of settings and mental states later on, as needed. The important point was for the narrator to not come to a halt. Keep on walking! was the motto. I've always been good at writing dialogue, so this way of writing was pretty straightforward. I recall the whole process, from start to finish, going smoothly, without any miscues. The result being a barebones, open sort of novel.

Normally this isn't how I write novels. I write everything neatly, orderly, from the beginning. That's my writing style. With passages that might take time to write, I don't skip ahead thinking I'll come back to them later (though actually I do add a lot later on). When I have to stop and take my time, I do that, until I'm satisfied with what I've written. So I stay in synch with the story, slowly, naturally moving ahead. That's the style I've always followed.

But with *After Dark* I decided from the start to try a totally different writing style. I wanted to see what kind of novel I could come up with using that new way of writing. I consciously sped up the pace of the story, quickly switching between viewpoints and scenes, sometimes writing in the first person, sometimes in the second, sometimes following a third person camera perspective. The events take place from late at night until seven am and the story is told entirely in the present tense. Realistic events and unreal events exist side by side, acting on each other. These are things that can only happen in the world in the middle of the night, a world wrapped in darkness, where image transcends logic.

In a word, *After Dark* is a very cinematic novel, written in a cinematic style. The story progressed as I followed images I had in my mind (like chasing after colorful

butterflies in a forest). So I thought it would be interesting if it were made into a film, though no one has asked to do so up to now. (Not that that particularly bothers me.)

I may have also wanted to deconstruct the novelistic world I'd built (or that seemed to be built) in my previous novel, *Kafka on the Shore*. I think this was important to me, and necessary. Readers, though, seemed to be expecting something different.

To be honest, at least when it was first published, this novel wasn't well received in Japan. Many critics, and ordinary readers alike, said they didn't like the novel, and were disappointed by it. The editor in charge at the publisher even fell ill because of all the negative criticism. Why this reaction? I suppose it's because the atmosphere of this novel differed so much from my previous books, and readers felt confused and put off by it. Perhaps even betrayed. But I think I did a good job of writing the novel, it was enjoyable to write, and as a technical experiment the novel taught me a lot. I had a real *Aha* type of moment, realizing this was another way I could write, and I think these new discoveries about writing served me well in the novels that followed. For a writer, adding even one more literary weapon to your arsenal, one you can easily employ, is a gift to be thankful for. Especially when you're giving everything you have, over a long stretch of time, to write a novel.

And also—my take on this—I think it might be a blessing in disguise for a writer to occasionally write a novel that isn't well received. Naturally if all you write are works that people don't like, that could be a problem, but if that unfavorable criticism stems from something the writer originally set out to do, the work will, despite the

criticism, have some intrinsic value. And trends in public opinion shift over time. A writer working over a long period of time no doubt has felt, and experienced, the tide turning any number of times. What's most important is the kind of feedback the author himself actually feels from the work, and as long as you grasp this clearly, time will be the judge of other, extraneous things. You have to trust in time. That's all you can do.

About twenty years have passed already since *After Dark* was published (I'm writing this in 2023), and I wonder how readers picking up this book for the first time will feel about it. I'm very curious to know. Has time been on my side?

Haruki Murakami, 2023
(Translated by Philip Gabriel)

After Dark

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1

Eyes mark the shape of the city. Through the eyes of a high-flying night bird, we take in the scene from midair. In our broad sweep, the city looks like a single gigantic creature—or more like a single collective entity created by many intertwining organisms. Countless arteries stretch to the ends of its elusive body, circulating a continuous supply of fresh blood cells, sending out new data and collecting the old, sending out new consumables and collecting the old, sending out new contradictions and collecting the old. To the rhythm of its pulsing, all parts of the body flicker and flare up and squirm. Midnight is approaching, and while the peak of activity has passed, the basal metabolism that maintains life continues undiminished, producing the basso continuo of the city's moan, a monotonous sound that neither rises nor falls but is pregnant with foreboding.

Our line of sight chooses an area of concentrated brightness and, focusing there, silently descends to it—a sea of neon colours. They call this place an “amusement

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district.” The giant digital screens fastened to the sides of buildings fall silent as midnight approaches, but loudspeakers on storefronts keep pumping out exaggerated hip-hop bass lines. A large game centre crammed with young people; wild electronic sounds; a group of college students spilling out from a bar; teenage girls with brilliant bleached hair, healthy legs thrusting out from microminiskirts; dark-suited men racing across diagonal crossings for the last trains to the suburbs. Even at this hour, the karaoke club pitchmen keep shouting for customers. A flashy black station wagon drifts down the street as if taking stock of the district through its black-tinted windows. The car looks like a deep-sea creature with specialised skin and organs. Two young policemen patrol the street with tense expressions, but no one seems to notice them. The district plays by its own rules at a time like this. The season is late autumn. No wind is blowing, but the air carries a chill. The date is just about to change.

We are inside a Denny’s.

Unremarkable but adequate lighting; expressionless decor and tableware; floor plan designed to the last detail by management engineers; innocuous background music at low volume; staff meticulously trained to deal with customers by the book: “Welcome to Denny’s.” Everything about the restaurant is anonymous and interchangeable. And almost every seat is filled.

After a quick survey of the interior, our eyes come to rest on a girl sitting by the front window. Why her? Why

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not someone else? Hard to say. But, for some reason, she attracts our attention—very naturally. She sits at a four-person table, reading a book. Hooded grey parka, blue jeans, yellow sneakers faded from repeated washing. On the back of the chair next to her hangs a varsity jacket. This, too, is far from new. She is probably college freshman age, though an air of high school still clings to her. Hair black, short, and straight. Little make-up, no jewellery. Small, slender face. Black-rimmed glasses. Every now and then, an earnest wrinkle forms between her brows.

She reads with great concentration. Her eyes rarely move from the pages of her book—a thick hardback. A bookstore wrapper hides the title from us. Judging from her intent expression, the book might contain challenging subject matter. Far from skimming, she seems to be biting off and chewing it one line at a time.

On her table is a coffee cup. And an ashtray. Next to the ashtray, a navy blue baseball cap with a Boston Red Sox “B.” It might be a little too large for her head. A brown leather shoulder bag rests on the seat next to her. It bulges as if its contents had been thrown in on the spur of the moment. She reaches out at regular intervals and brings the coffee cup to her mouth, but she doesn’t appear to be enjoying the flavour. She drinks because she has a cup of coffee in front of her: that is her role as a customer. At odd moments, she puts a cigarette between her lips and lights it with a plastic lighter. She narrows her eyes, releases an easy puff of smoke into the air, puts the cigarette into the ashtray and then, as if to soothe an

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approaching headache, she strokes her temples with her fingertips.

The music playing at low volume is “Go Away Little Girl” by Percy Faith and his Orchestra. No one is listening, of course. Many different kinds of people are taking meals and drinking coffee in this late-night Denny’s, but she is the only female there alone. She raises her face from her book now and then to glance at her watch, but she seems dissatisfied with the slow passage of time. Not that she appears to be waiting for anyone: she doesn’t look around the restaurant or train her eyes on the front door. She just keeps reading her book, lighting an occasional cigarette, mechanically tipping back her coffee cup, and hoping for the time to pass a little faster. Needless to say, dawn will not be here for hours.

She breaks off her reading and looks outside. From this second-storey window she can look down on the busy street. Even at a time like this, the street is bright enough and filled with people coming and going—people with places to go and people with no place to go; people with a purpose and people with no purpose; people trying to hold time back and people trying to urge it forward. After a long, steady look at this jumbled street scene, she holds her breath for a moment and turns her eyes once again towards her book. She reaches for her coffee cup. Puffed no more than two or three times, her cigarette turns into a perfectly formed column of ash in the ashtray.

The electric door slides open and a lanky young man walks in. Short black leather coat, wrinkled olive-green

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chinos, brown work boots. Hair fairly long and tangled in places. Perhaps he has had no chance to wash it in some days. Perhaps he has just crawled out of the underbrush somewhere. Or perhaps he just finds it more natural and comfortable to have messy hair. His thinness makes him look less elegant than malnourished. A big black instrument case hangs from his shoulder. Wind instrument. He also holds a dirty tote bag at his side. It seems to be stuffed with sheet music and other assorted things. His right cheek bears an eye-catching scar. It is short and deep, as if the flesh has been gouged out by something sharp. Nothing else about him stands out. He is a very ordinary young man with the air of a nice—but not very clever—stray mutt.

The waitress on hostess duty shows him to a seat at the back of the restaurant. He passes the table of the girl with the book. A few steps beyond it, he comes to a halt as if a thought has struck him. He begins moving slowly backwards as in a rewinding film, stopping at her table. He cocks his head and studies her face. He is trying to remember something, and much time goes by until he gets it. He seems like the type for whom everything takes time.

The girl senses his presence and raises her face from her book. She narrows her eyes and looks at the young man standing there. He is so tall, she seems to be looking far overhead. Their eyes meet. The young man smiles. His smile is meant to show he means no harm.

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“Sorry if I’ve got the wrong person,” he says, “but aren’t you Eri Asai’s little sister?”

She does not answer. She looks at him with eyes that could be looking at an overgrown bush in the corner of a garden.

“We met once,” he continues. “Your name is . . . Yuri . . . sort of like your sister Eri’s except the first syllable.”

Keeping a cautious gaze fixed on him, she executes a concise factual correction: “Mari.”

He raises his index finger and says, “That’s it! Mari. Eri and Mari. Different first syllables. You don’t remember me, do you?”

Mari inclines her head slightly. This could mean either yes or no. She takes off her glasses and sets them down beside her coffee cup.

The waitress retraces her steps and asks, “Are you together?”

“Uh-huh,” he answers. “We are.”

She sets his menu on the table. He takes the seat across from Mari and puts his case on the seat next to his. A moment later he thinks to ask Mari, “Mind if I sit here a while? I’ll get out as soon as I’m finished eating. I have to meet somebody.”

Mari gives him a slight frown. “Aren’t you supposed to say that *before* you sit down?”

He thinks about the meaning of her words. “That I have to meet somebody?”

“No . . .” Mari says.

“Oh, you mean as a matter of politeness.”

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“Uh-huh.”

He nods. “You’re right. I should have asked if it’s okay to sit at your table. I’m sorry. But the place is crowded, and I won’t bother you for long. Do you mind?”

Mari gives her shoulders a little shrug that seems to mean “As you wish.” He opens his menu and studies it.

“Are you through eating?” he asks.

“I’m not hungry.”

With a scowl, he scans the menu, snaps it shut, and lays it on the table. “I really don’t have to open the menu,” he says. “I’m just faking it.”

Mari doesn’t say anything.

“I don’t eat anything but chicken salad here. Ever. If you ask me, the only thing worth eating at Denny’s is the chicken salad. I’ve had just about everything on the menu. Have you ever tried their chicken salad?”

Mari shakes her head.

“It’s not bad. Chicken salad and crispy toast. That’s all I ever eat at Denny’s.”

“So why do you even bother looking at the menu?”

He pulls at the wrinkles in the corner of one eye with his little finger. “Just think about it. Wouldn’t it be too sad to walk into Denny’s and order chicken salad without looking at the menu? It’s like telling the world, ‘I come to Denny’s all the time because I love the chicken salad.’ So I always go through the motion of opening the menu and pretending I picked the chicken salad after considering other things.”

The waitress brings him water and he orders chicken

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salad and crispy toast. “Make it really crispy,” he says with conviction. “Almost burnt.” He also orders coffee for afterwards. The waitress inputs his order using a hand-held device and confirms it by reading it aloud.

“And I think the young lady needs a refill,” he says, pointing at Mari’s cup.

“Thank you, sir. I will bring the coffee right away.”

He watches her go off.

“You don’t like chicken?” he asks.

“It’s not that,” Mari says. “But I make a point of not eating chicken out.”

“Why not?”

“Especially the chicken they serve in chain restaurants—they’re full of weird drugs. Growth hormones and stuff. The chickens are locked in these dark, narrow cages, and given all these shots, and their feed is full of chemicals, and they’re put on conveyor belts, and machines cut their heads off and pluck them . . .”

“Whoa!” he says with a smile. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepen. “Chicken salad à la George Orwell!”

Mari narrows her eyes and looks at him. She can’t tell if he is making fun of her.

“Anyhow,” he says, “the chicken salad here is not bad. Really.”

As if suddenly recalling that he is wearing it, he takes off his leather coat, folds it, and lays it on the seat next to his. Then he rubs his hands together atop the table. He has on a green, coarse-knit crew-neck sweater. Like his hair, the wool of the sweater is tangled in places. He is

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obviously not the sort who pays a lot of attention to his appearance.

“We met at a hotel swimming pool in Shinagawa. Two summers ago. Remember?”

“Sort of.”

“My buddy was there, your sister was there, you were there, and I was there. Four of us all together. We had just entered college, and I’m pretty sure you were in your second year of high school. Right?”

Mari nods without much apparent interest.

“My friend was kinda dating your sister then. He brought me along on like a double date. He dug up four free tickets to the pool, and your sister brought you along. You hardly said a word, though. You spent the whole time in the pool, swimming like a young dolphin. We went to the hotel tea room for ice cream afterwards. You ordered a peach melba.”

Mari frowns. “How come you remember stuff like that?”

“I never dated a girl who ate peach melba before. And you were cute, of course.”

Mari looks at him blankly. “Liar. You were staring at my sister the whole time.”

“I was?”

Mari answers with silence.

“Maybe I was,” he says. “For some reason I remember her bikini was really tiny.”

Mari pulls out a cigarette, puts it between her lips, and lights it with her lighter.

“Let me tell you something,” he says. “I’m not trying to

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