

# On A Year of Murakami

Randy Chang, written for *The Blue and White* on November 7th, 2022

I'd like to dedicate this piece to Zachary Gopinath '23. A fellow Murakami reader, and my best friend. Thank you for the Kafka, the laughter, and the memories. I miss you. x

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I recently completed Japanese author Haruki Murakami's entire English oeuvre, of 25 books. I must credit Matthew Wang '18 who first completed this and inspired my goal. I never intended to read this much when I started in December 2021, but just a few weeks ago, I closed my final Murakami, *Conversations on Music*. I've included some thoughts, my rankings of his work, my personal favourites, and where to start: all deeply personal viewpoints that should be scrutinised.

## Beginnings

- I. The scariest part of life is being alone. Ironically, up until I was 11, the opposite was true for me. I was scared of people and much preferred being alone. It didn't matter who "people" were: librarians, cashiers, friends, teachers, managers. Asking for things was petrifying, small talk was impossible, and starting conversations was unthinkable.

My childhood was largely spent reading books and playing video games at home, in a comfortable cocoon of solitude. Of course, when you're a kid, you're encouraged to be social. I was extroverted enough to not ring warning bells, but I hated every second of recess and playdates. I'd spend more time on mentally preparing to play than play itself. In grade three, I said "cleaning up before March break" was my favourite memory, because it combined a therapeutic activity one did alone with a reminder that extended respite from social situations was on the horizon.

Things soon changed. My parents wanted me to get into a local high-achieving private school, and I couldn't do that with my fear of adults, and students, and people in general. Their solution was to have me confront failure in social interactions. The extreme embarrassment, they claimed, would fix my antisocialness. Their method was having me interview for another private school, UCC. My parents thought UCC was notable for their extroverted students and low acceptance rates, a deadly combo that would reject me and motivate me for the more important interview down the line.

My parents' plan failed when I got a letter of acceptance. I never even interviewed for the other school.

## Changes

- II. My first actual encounter with Murakami was when I found a copy of *Men Without Women* lying around in an UCC classroom. I had heard the name before, and I almost bought one of his works so I could talk to a girl, but never got around to it. The start of my journey, in Murakami fashion, was based on an ostensibly random incident. I hope this is paying it forward, in some respect.

## Descriptions

- III. Nowadays, most of UCC sees me as an extrovert — one teacher uses the term “prima donna”, which I have grown to enjoy — but I still take an eerie pleasure in the peace of being alone. Engulfing yourself in the act of fixing a meal, focusing on the little creases as you iron an old t-shirt, reading a book with jazz in the background: to live small and simple is an addicting way of life.

That is the starting point for most (I would argue all) of Haruki Murakami’s novels. His protagonists are invariably young adults who are, by all accounts, often average. They don’t lack money, but aren’t rolling in it. They love classical and jazz, but don’t play. They have jobs (coincidentally, often jobs Murakami has worked) but aren’t Fortune 500 CEOs. The common thread is that they are exceedingly lonely, without family, friends, or even co-workers that they’re amicable with. While other fans may disagree, I see Murakami novels, fundamentally, as explorations of loneliness and the comfort of a solitary life.

Solitude and the simple life is only ever the starting point for his stories. The departure from simplicity that happens afterwards is hard to summarise in words, and I have no idea how critics do it. Being asked to describe a Murakami novel is almost like being asked to explain the mind of Mike Tyson. Both are philosophical and bizarre. Both pack a punch. But most importantly, there is so much going on in both, the only way to avoid being overwhelmed is to sit back and allow the eclectic chaos to envelop you.

In my opinion, that chaos is where his cult following originates. A Murakami novel creates a comforting haze that only upon finishing do you become strongly aware of its absence. You miss the comfort of the chaos, if you will.

My life changed and turned and somersaulted in the past year: from taking on new responsibilities in February to travelling Europe in June and every experience being tainted with the prefix “last” in senior year. I’ve found myself increasingly leaning on Murakami’s comfortable chaos as my life devolved, at points, to chaotic discomfort.

Along my journey exploring the chaos of his stories, I’ve ironically, in a Murakami-esque way, discovered a sparse little underground community of Murakami fans in the school. It reaches alumni, faculty, and staff. I’m sure I could uncover others with time. Every one of these fellow fans has accredited Murakami’s comfort to a different element of his work: from the artistically complex descriptions of simple food, to his bizarrely surrealist elements like fish raining at noon, or a man who gains superpowers from the souls of cats. The only point of agreement between all readers is that there is indeed a sense of comfort in the chaos of his books.

Speaking of notoriety, Murakami does have his flaws. I am deeply critical of his portrayal of women, sex, and the “establishment” (an imperfect term, but generalisation is needed when discussing trends across twentysomething novels). He is best enjoyed when one sees him as a

flawed friend recounting a story rather than a literary paragon. I have never met another fan who does not openly criticise portions of his work.

### Connectors and Conclusions

- IV. The layers that mark Murakami's work and biography mean he is nearly impossible to explain. Yet, the one layered term that comes close to explaining Murakami is "connector".

Torn between different worlds, his characters connect the supernatural and the mundane. Murakami has described his writing process as connecting to an otherwise locked "black box" of creativity, connecting our minds to his mental image via the page. Trying to figure out the complexities of his work has connected me to a number of people around the school, to alumni I otherwise might've lost touch with, to millions on subreddits and forums all trying to do the same thing.

In other words, connecting happens within the story, between the story and reader, and between readers. There's a sweet irony in that. Connection is the defining feature of the solitary author and his solitary protagonists.

It's been a good year. Thank you to all the teachers and friends who supported this habit, my parents who funded it, and my local secondhand bookstore for supplying it (BMV's Colin, Matt, and Terry: the real ones).

As Matt Wang writes: "[Murakami's] still writing more books. And I'll be reading them".

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### My Rankings

Again, very subjective, and probably wrong at parts.

#### **"Tied for first"**

- *South of the Border, West of the Sun*
- *Killing Commendatore*
- *Hard Boiled Wonderland and The End Of The World*
- *Dance, Dance, Dance*

#### **I would pay any amount to re-experience**

- *1Q84*
- *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle*
- *Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki*
- *After the Quake*
- *Underground*
- *Norwegian Wood*

#### **I would have a high limit on how much I pay to re-experience**

- *First Person Singular*
- *Pinball, 1973*

- *A Wild Sheep Chase*
- *Men Without Women*
- *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*
- *After Dark*
- *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*
- *Sputnik Sweetheart*

**If I had to sell my collection, losing these would cause immense, but comparatively slightly less, pain**

- *The Strange Library*
- *Kafka On the Shore*
- *The Elephant Vanishes*
- *Hear the Wind Sing*
- *The T-Shirts I Love*
- *Absolutely on Music*

### **Where I'd start**

If I could do it again, I'd begin Murakami with either *Men Without Women* (where I started!), *Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki*, or *Sputnik Sweetheart*. They're "weird" enough to get a reader used to Murakami's style, but not so weird that your worldview is deleted. Only rattled, somewhat.

I've found starting at these points will improve your experience with all future Murakami novels. Yet, if you're not sure about reading multiple, and you're simply looking for an enjoyable one-off novel, I'd recommend *South of the Border*, *West of the Sun* or *Killing Commendatore*. If you have the time, pick up the pairing of *Wild Sheep Chase* and *Dance, Dance, Dance*, or read *1Q84*.

Some will suggest *Kafka on the Shore* and *Norwegian Wood* as the places to start. I think this is a terrible idea: the former is like learning to swim in shark-infested waters and the latter is like learning to swim by intensely doing the motions on land. *Kafka* has too steep of a learning curve, and *Norwegian Wood* isn't particularly similar to his other work. In fact, I'd argue Murakami's most commercially successful, or even the best places to start, are rarely his overall best, but that's another article.