

Never Let Me Go: Everyone's a Critic

Lev Grossman

It's natural for a child to assume that his or her own childhood is unremarkable. That's one reason it takes Kathy, the narrator of *Never Let Me Go*, so long to twig that the very exclusive English boarding school she attends with her friends Ruth and Tommy is not quite ordinary. No responsible reviewer would reveal the exact nature of the horror that lurks there, but suffice to say that it's thoroughly horrific. Ishiguro's readers see the looming shadows before Kathy does, but by then it is far too late. It has always been too late for Kathy. She tells her story with a dry-eyed, almost plodding matter-of-factness that only makes her plight that much more plausible – her lack of artistry is a tribute to Ishiguro's consummate artistry. As they grow up, the students at her school long for even the most basic trappings of a normal life – Ruth fantasizes about one day working in an office — but fantasies are all they will ever have. Set in a darkling mirror-England, *Never Let Me Go* is a work of science-fiction horror with a tragic payoff as devastating as anything in modern literature. It could easily be mistaken for a work of bioethics, or a genre thriller, but it's more than either of these: *Never Let Me Go* is an existential waltz, set to the music of hopelessness, about ordinary people trying to wring some joy out of life before it ends, and trying not to flinch as the axe falls.

Margaret Atwood

Never Let Me Go is the sixth novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, who won the Booker Prize in 1989 for his chilling rendition of a bootlickingly-devoted but morally blank English butler, *The Remains of the Day*. It's a thoughtful, crafty, and finally very disquieting look at the effects of dehumanization on any group that's subject to it. In Ishiguro's subtle hands, these effects are far from obvious. There's no Them-Bad, Us-Good preaching; rather, there's the feeling that as the expectations of such a group are diminished, so is its ability to think outside the box it has been shut up in. The reader reaches the end of the book wondering exactly where the walls of his or her own invisible box begin and end.

Ishiguro likes to experiment with literary hybrids, to hijack popular forms for his own ends, and to set his novels against tenebrous historical backdrops; thus *When We Were Orphans* mixes the Boys' Own Adventure with the '30s detective story while taking a whole new slice out of World War II. An Ishiguro novel is never about what it pretends to pretend to be about, and *Never Let Me Go* is true to form. You might think of it as the Enid Blyton schoolgirl story crossed with *Blade Runner*, and perhaps also with John Wyndham's shunned-children classic, *The Chrysalids*: The children in it, like those in *Never Let Me Go*, give other people the creeps.

The narrator, Kathy H., is looking back on her school days at a superficially idyllic establishment called Hailsham. (As in "sham"; as in Charles Dickens' Miss Havisham, exploiter of uncomprehending children.) At first you think the "H" in "Kathy H." is the initial of a surname, but none of the students at Hailsham has a real surname. Soon you understand that there's something very peculiar about this school. Tommy, for instance, who is the best boy at football, is picked on because he's no good at art: In a conventional school it would be the other way around.

In fact, Hailsham exists to raise cloned children who have been brought into the world for the sole purpose of providing organs to other, "normal" people. They don't have parents. They can't have children. Once they graduate, they will go through a period of being "carers" to others of their kind who are already being deprived of their organs; then they will undergo up to four "donations"

themselves, until they “complete.” (None of these terms has originated with Ishiguro; he just gives them an extra twist.) The whole enterprise, like most human enterprises of dubious morality, is wrapped in euphemism and shadow: The outer world wants these children to exist because it’s greedy for the benefits they can confer, but it doesn’t wish to look head-on at what is happening. We assume – though it’s never stated – that whatever objections might have been raised to such a scheme have already been overcome: By now the rules are in place and the situation is taken for granted – as slavery was once – by beneficiaries and victims alike.

All this is background. Ishiguro isn’t much interested in the practicalities of cloning and organ donation. (Which four organs, you may wonder? A liver, two kidneys, then the heart? But wouldn’t you be dead after the second kidney, anyway? Or are we throwing in the pancreas?) Nor is this a novel about future horrors: It’s set, not in a Britain-yet-to-come, but in a Britain-off-to-the-side, in which cloning has been introduced before the 1970s. Kathy H. is 31 in the late 1990s, which places her childhood and adolescence in the ‘70s and early ‘80s – close to those of Ishiguro, who was born in 1955 in Nagasaki and moved to England when he was 5. (Surely there’s a connection: As a child, Ishiguro must have seen many young people dying far too soon, through no fault of their own.) And so the observed detail is realistic – the landscapes, the kind of sports pavilion at Hailsham, the assortment of teachers and “guardians,” even the fact that Kathy listens to her music via tape, not CD.

Kathy H. has nothing to say about the unfairness of her fate. Indeed, she considers herself lucky to have grown up in a superior establishment like Hailsham rather than on the standard organ farm. Like most people, she’s interested in personal relationships: in her case, the connection between her “best friend,” the bossy and manipulative Ruth, and the boy she loves – Tommy, the amiable football-playing bad artist. Ishiguro’s tone is perfect: Kathy is intelligent but nothing extraordinary, and she prattles on in the obsessive manner touchy girls have, going back over past conversations and registering every comment and twitch and crush and put-down and cold shoulder and gang-up and spat. It’s all hideously familiar and gruesomely compelling to anyone who ever kept a teenage diary.

In the course of her story, Kathy H. solves a few of the mysteries that have been bothering her. Why is it so important that these children make art, and why is their art collected and taken away? Why does it matter to anyone that they be educated, if they’re only going to die young anyway? Are they human or not? There’s a chilling echo of the art-making children in Theresienstadt and of the Japanese children dying of radiation who nevertheless made paper cranes.

What is art for? the characters ask. They connect the question to their own circumstances, but surely they speak for anyone with a connection with the arts: What is art for? The notion that it ought to be for something, that it must serve some clear social purpose – extolling the gods, cheering people up, illustrating moral lessons – has been around at least since Plato and was tyrannical in the 19th century. It lingers with us still, especially when parents and teachers start squabbling over the school curricula. Art does turn out to have a purpose in *Never Let Me Go*, but it isn’t quite the purpose the characters have been hoping for.

One motif at the very core of *Never Let Me Go* is the treatment of out-groups, and the way out-groups form in-groups, even among themselves. The marginalized are not exempt from doing their own marginalization: Even as they die, Ruth and Tommy and the other donors form a proud, cruel little clique, excluding Kathy H. because, not being a donor yet, she can’t really understand.

The book is also about our tendency to cannibalize others to make sure we ourselves get a soft ride. Ursula Le Guin has a short story called *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*, in which the happiness of the many depends absolutely on the arranged unhappiness of the few, and *Never Let Me Go* could be read as a sister text: The children of Hailsham are human sacrifices, offered up on the altar of improved health for the population at large. With babies already being created with a view to their organs – help for an afflicted sibling, for instance – the dilemma of the Hailsham “students” is bound to become more general. Who owns your body? Who therefore is entitled to offer it up? The reluctance of Kathy H. and her pals to really confront what awaits them – pain, mutilation, death – may account for the curious lack of physicality of Kathy's descriptions of their life. Nobody eats anything much in this book, nobody smells anything. We don't know much about what the main characters look like. Even the sex is oddly bloodless. But landscapes, buildings, and the weather are intensely present. It's as if Kathy has invested a lot of her sense of self in things quite far away from her own body, and thus less likely to be injured.

Finally, the book is also about our wish to do well, to attract approval. The children's poignant desire to be patted on the head – to be a “good carer,” keeping those from whom organs are being taken from becoming too distressed; to be a “good donor,” someone who makes it through all four “donations” – is heartbreaking. This is what traps them in their cage: None of them thinks about running away or revenging themselves upon the “normal” members of society. Ruth takes refuge in grandiose lies about herself and in daydreams – maybe she'll be allowed to get an office job. Tommy reacts with occasional rage to the unconscionable things being done to him, but then apologizes for his loss of control. In Ishiguro's world, as in our own, most people do what they're told.

Tellingly, two words recur again and again. One, as you might expect, is “normal.” The other is “supposed,” as in the last words of the book: “wherever it was that I was supposed to be going.” Who defines “normal”? Who tells us what we are supposed to be doing? These questions always become more pressing in times of stress; unless I'm much mistaken, they'll loom ever larger in the next few years.

Never Let Me Go is unlikely to be everybody's cup of tea. The people in it aren't heroic. The ending is not comforting. Nevertheless, this is a brilliantly executed book by a master craftsman who has chosen a difficult subject: ourselves, seen through a glass, darkly.

Louis Menaud

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is a novel about a young woman named Kathy H., and her friendships with two schoolmates, Ruth and Tommy. The triangle is a standard one: Kathy is attracted to Tommy; Tommy gets involved with Ruth, who is also Kathy's best friend; Ruth knows that Tommy is really in love with Kathy; Kathy gets Tommy in the end, although they both realize that it is too late, and that they have missed their best years. Their lives are short; they know that they are doomed. So the small betrayal leaves an enormous wound. As is customary with Ishiguro, the narrator, Kathy, is ingenuous but keenly desirous of telling us how it was, the prose feels self-consciously stilted and banal, and the psychology is not deep. The central premise in this book is basically the same as that in the book that made Ishiguro famous, *The Remains of the Day*: even when happiness is standing right in front of you, it's very hard to grasp. Probably you already suspected that.

It is always a puzzle to know where Ishiguro's true subject lies. The emotional situation in his novels is spelled out in meticulous, sometimes comically tedious detail, and the focus is entirely on the narrator's struggles to achieve clarity and contentment in an uncooperative world. Ishiguro is expert at getting readers choked up over these struggles – even over the ludicrous self-deceptions of the butler in *The Remains of the Day*, the hopeless Stevens. But he is also expert at arranging his figurines against shadowy and suggestive backdrops: post-fascist Japan, in *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*; an unidentified Central European town undergoing an indeterminate cultural crisis, in *The Unconsoled*; Shanghai at the time of the Sino-Japanese War, in *When We Were Orphans*. It seems important to an understanding of *The Remains of the Day* that the man for whom Stevens once worked, Lord Darlington, was a Fascist sympathizer. But it is not particularly important to Stevens, who has no political wisdom, and who is, in any case, preoccupied with enforcing his own regimen of emotional repression.

The shadowy backdrop in *Never Let Me Go* is genetic engineering and associated technologies. Kathy tells her story in (the novel says) “England, late 1990s,” so the book seems to belong to the same genre as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, counterfactual historical fiction. Conditions in this brave-new-world Britain, and exactly how Kathy and her friends fit into them, are all spooky authorial surprises, and (as is the case with most things) when you're reading the novel it is best to begin without too many prior assumptions. Kathy is a “carer”; her patients give “donations,” occasionally as many as four. Inch by inch, the curtain is lifted, and we see what these terms mean and why the world is this way. The strangeness, like the strangeness in Ishiguro's most imaginative novel, *The Unconsoled*, is ingeniously evoked – by means of literal-minded accounts of things that don't quite add up – and teasing out the hidden story is the main pleasure of the book. In *The Unconsoled*, the story is never fully sorted out; at the end, we remain in the hall of mirrors. Unfortunately, *Never Let Me Go* includes a carefully-staged revelation scene, in which everything is, somewhat portentously, explained. It's a little Hollywood, and the elucidation is purchased at too high a price. The scene pushes the novel over into science fiction, and this is not, at heart, where it seems to want to be.

But where the novel does want to be is even less obvious than usual. Ishiguro is praised for his precision and his psychological acuity, and is compared to writers like Henry James and Jane Austen. In fact, he says that he dislikes James and Austen. He also says that he has never been able to get beyond the first volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*; it's too dull. On the other hand, although his novels are self-consciously “set,” they are not historical novels, and the facts don't seem to interest him very much. Ishiguro was born in Japan, but his parents moved to England with him when he was five. He cannot speak Japanese very well; he has not expressed any particular admiration for Japan or its culture; and he set his first two novels in Japan without revisiting the country. He appears to have done some research for *When We Were Orphans*, but in *Never Let Me Go*, even after the secrets have been revealed, there are still a lot of holes in the story. This is not because things are meant to be opaque; it's because, apparently, genetic science isn't what the book is about.

Ishiguro does not write like a realist. He writes like someone impersonating a realist, and this is one reason for the peculiar fascination of his books. He is actually a fabulist and an ironist, and the writers he most resembles, under the genteel mask, are Kafka and Beckett. This is why the prose is

always slightly overspecific. It's realism from an instruction manual: literal, thorough, determined to leave nothing out. But it has a vaguely unreal effect.

Beckett's subject, too, was happiness, and, though Ishiguro's characters seem so earnestly respectable, they have the same mad, compulsive, quasi-mechanical qualities that Beckett's do. There is something animatronic about them. They are simulators of humanness, figures engineered to pass as "real." What it means to be really human is always a problem for them. Can you just copy other people? Would that take care of it? "I have of course already devoted much time to developing my bantering skills," Stevens explains at the end of *The Remains of the Day*, "but it is possible I have never previously approached the task with the commitment I might have done." Genetic engineering – the idea of human beings as products programmed to pick up "personhood skills" – is a perfect vehicle for a writer like Ishiguro.

For reasons that belong to the story's secret, the characters in *Never Let Me Go* all feel obliged to create works of art. Tommy is slower to develop creatively than his schoolmates, and when he starts to make drawings they are pictures of animals. He finally shows them to Kathy:

I was taken aback at how densely detailed each one was. In fact, it took a moment to see they were animals at all. The first impression was like one you'd get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird... For all their busy, metallic features, there was something sweet, even vulnerable about each of them.

The passage almost certainly derives from Henri Bergson's famous definition of comedy: the mechanical encrusted on the living. The creatures Tommy draws are imagined versions of himself. They are funny and pathetic at the same time, because people behaving like wind-up toys, even when they can't help it, even when it makes them fall down manholes, make us laugh. This is why Beckett is a comic writer, and it's why Ishiguro's novels, though filled with incidents of poignancy and disappointment and cruelty, are also, weirdly, funny. His sad characters can't help themselves.

Andrew Barrow

Kazuo Ishiguro is a master storyteller, in a class of his own making. In this, his sixth and strangest novel, his narrative brilliance depends, as always, on over-simplicity, a highly provocative idiom which embraces both the prosaic and the prissy. Innumerable sleights of hand, sly flash-forwards, almost psychotic bits of underwriting and a multitude of red herrings combine to make the reader ache with curiosity about what happened earlier and what happens next.

Ostensibly – but this is surely just another massive Ishiguro tease – *Never Let Me Go* is about a group of genetically-engineered or test-tube children living in a comfortable country house called Hailsham. Here there is a sports pavilion and a playing field, and the students do ordinary things like playing rounders. One little girl even has a gorgeous, luscious pencil case with a furry pom-pom attached to its zip...

Quite so, but from the uneasy opening lines onwards, we know there is something special about these children. They have no parents, no surnames, they never go on holiday, they will never have babies of their own. They are, in fact, being exclusively bred to become "donors."

The exact meaning of this sinister word is not made clear until one of their more outspoken guardians suddenly blurts it all out. “None of you will go to America,” she tells her charges. “None of you will be film stars...Your lives are set out for you. You’ll become adults, then...you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you was created to do.”

This thoroughly macabre tale is told by a pupil called Kathy in a schoolgirlish or nurse-like vernacular, at times brooding, mawkish, wearisome or poignantly cheery. She focuses particularly on her relationship with two fellow students, Tommy and Ruth. The bonds of loyalty between them, the allegiance and camaraderie – old Ishiguro themes – provide the book with its title. The hold they exercise on each other, and on the reader, becomes tighter as the story proceeds.

The dreadfulness of the subject matter – even Kathy admits at one point, “It’s horror movie stuff” – is rubbed in by the perkily banal language. The rain comes “bucketing down,” people “don’t have the faintest,” and sections begin with preambles like, “This might all sound daft but...”. From time to time, the reader is dragged in, if not fatally compromised, by asides like, “I don’t know how it was where you were...”.

After a while, the story moves away from Hailsham – the name has its own eerie resonance and double meanings – but into an only marginally wider world. Kathy is now a carer, still closely involved with Tommy and Ruth, and hurrying between various “recovery centres” where she helps uncomplaining donors through their suicidally heroic ordeals. Donors, incidentally, do not “die.” They “complete.”

The narrator’s time on the roads echoes the lovesick butler’s odyssey in *The Remains of the Day*. She often sleeps in an “overnight” and sits alone in motorway cafeterias. Ishiguro’s England is a simplified and desolate place, featureless apart from the odd bus shelter – wasn’t there a significant bus shelter in the butler’s story? – and such comically downbeat things as the shadowy reflections you see in hospital floors or “double glazed windows which seal at the touch of a handle.”

The relish with which such matters are described is central to Ishiguro’s art, but their incorporation into the text is done with such enigmatic grace and lightness of touch, such naturalness, that the reader may be forgiven for sometimes wondering if they are reflections of the author’s own character and taste. Ishiguro undoubtedly has an artist’s double vision. Perhaps he is also genuinely interested in double-glazing? If this is so, does it make his naively innocent pose somewhat artificial? It is also tempting to ask if Ishiguro’s use of red herrings is a form of genius or evidence of a wandering mind.

In this novel, he frequently builds up the tension with appetite-whetting references to offstage noises, unexplained things on people’s sleeves or – as in his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* – caught around people’s feet. Such diversions seem to have no direct bearing on the plot but their accumulated effect is so invigorating that it hardly matters if these are meticulously calculated master strokes or, just occasionally, actual slips of the pen.

Halfway through, Kathy and her two chums even pay a typically irrelevant but highly disturbing token visit to some symbolic marshland, a chilling reminder of the wistful landscape featured in *A Pale View of Hills*. This is the only occasion in *Never Let Me Go* when the author reverts to the Japanese-ness that characterized his early work and the dreaminess in which some critics feel he over-indulged in his mightily ambitious *The Unconsoled*.

The narrative is rendered even more exciting by the fact that none of these poor doomed “clones” fights their fate. Have they been brainwashed not to care?

A brief flutter of interest is created by a chance encounter with a woman from whom Kathy's friend Ruth might possibly have been cloned, but their origins are of only passing interest to them. “Look down the toilet,” she declares after this last episode. “That’s where you’ll find we all come from.”

In an utterly riveting final scene, which takes place in Littlehampton of all places (more Ishiguro playfulness?), our heroes have a meeting with the two high-minded women who set up Hailsham. Here the author introduces a beautiful red herring in the shape of a mysterious bedside cabinet which is being heaved down some stairs and taken off in a white van.

This is all very suggestive, all very medical, but *Never Let Me Go* has as little to do with genetic engineering and the cloning controversy as *The Remains of the Day* has to do with butlering or *When We Were Orphans* to do with detective work.

Ishiguro is primarily a poet. Accuracy of social observation, dialogue and even characterisation is not his aim. In this deceptively sad novel, he simply uses a science-fiction framework to throw light on ordinary human life, the human soul, human sexuality, love, creativity and childhood innocence.

He does so with devastating effect, gently hinting that we are all, to some extent, clones, all copycats and mimics who acquire our mannerisms from the TV and cinema screens, even advertisements, as much as from our elders and betters. And, more frighteningly, that we are all, to some extent, pawns in someone else's game, our lives set out for us.

Andrew O’Hehir

One of the things you figure out pretty quickly about Kathy H., the narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro’s devastating new novel, *Never Let Me Go*, is that that’s really her name. It’s not an arch literary device, and Kathy isn’t hiding anything. Like the other students at Hailsham, a peculiar boarding school somewhere in the English countryside – Kathy doesn’t quite know where – she just has a first name followed by an initial. Once you’ve got that fact in your grasp, the wrenching and suspenseful skein of *Never Let Me Go* begins to unfold before you. It’s a shame to give much of this novel away, but it’s even more of a shame not to entice you into reading it.

Ishiguro, the Japanese-born British author of *The Remains of the Day*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, and several other novels, has a reputation as a difficult and serious writer that isn’t doing him any favors. True, his books aren’t exactly lighter-than-air confections and his endings tend toward the mercilessly downbeat, but he’s one of the few literary authors with the storytelling chops of popular fiction. (One also thinks of Margaret Atwood, Denis Johnson and Robert Stone.) *Never Let Me Go* is a work of meticulous, pitch-perfect writing, but it’s also an obsessive page turner that kept me up almost till dawn and left me feeling emotionally shattered.

Kathy is now an adult of 31, recalling her Hailsham years and her two best friends, Ruth and Tommy, who were the other two legs of an unstable teenage romantic triangle. These characters are so convincingly rendered, and the incestuous, quasi-Gothic atmosphere of Hailsham so lovingly captured, that *Never Let Me Go* would still make a compelling read if that was all there was to the

story. Ruth is the domineering alpha-female type; she recruits Kathy to a secret society when they're about 8 – and later expels her – and always has to have the last word on every subject, from chess to sex to the fiction of George Eliot (even if she can't play chess, is a virgin, and hasn't read *Daniel Deronda*).

Tommy is an entirely different matter. He's the school's star athlete, but is so hot-tempered and childlike in manner that the other boys torment him until Ruth and Kathy adopt him and groom him to be more socially presentable. Most of *Never Let Me Go* tracks the evolving relationship of these three as they move through Hailsham and then out into the world, but their teenage passions and enthusiasms are increasingly shadowed by the larger question of their destiny – theirs and those of every other Hailsham student.

We know from the very first page that present-tense Kathy is a “carer,” and that the people she cares for are “donors.” In her cheerful, good-English-girl manner, she notes that hardly any of her donors “have been classified as ‘agitated,’ even before fourth donation.” That means just what it sounds like, and it makes things 10 times worse that Kathy is completely unaware (or, let's say, almost completely) that the world she's living in is a horror story come to life. If *Never Let Me Go* is set, as Ishiguro stipulates, in late-'90s England, it's not quite the '90s that we remember. Instead, it seems to be a society that stumbled, some decades earlier, down a terrible technological path that makes Dr. Mengele look like a humanitarian.

It might be technically correct to describe this novel as dystopian science fiction or a parable about contemporary life that addresses some social issue (fill in the blank yourself). As a Hollywood formula, I guess you could boil this down to *1984* meets *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. But that's not really fair. Ishiguro is far more interested in capturing the subjective reality of Kathy and her chums, who are, as one of their Hailsham teachers says, “told but not told” about what awaits them – and who, like all children, more or less accept the terms of their existence.

Still, as they grow older, they begin to confront the fact that they are not like “normal people”: They are human beings who have no parents and who will have no children, and none of them will make it long past the beginning of middle age. (In the bureaucratic dialect Ishiguro has created, successful donors do not die, they “complete” – and what lies beyond that is the subject of a troubling rumor.) At Hailsham and other places like it (other places that may be much worse) they are being raised for one purpose alone.

Why, then, are the Hailsham students being educated so well? What about the rumors of a girl in Wales allowed to work in a stylish clothing boutique, or all the mysterious emphasis placed on their creative work as writers and artists? (One teacher tells them it may be used as “evidence” – but evidence of what?) Like all the best speculative fiction – and this is one of the best new novels of any species I've read in a long time – *Never Let Me Go* has a mystery to unfold, or several of them.

But Ishiguro isn't searching for the moral high ground. His darkest mysteries are, to coin a phrase, those of the human heart. If you shed tears for upright, stolid Kathy and honest, tormented Tommy and even for vainglorious, conniving Ruth, it won't be because of the oddities of their Kafkaesque situation but because, like all of us, they are lonely and alone, doing their best to walk the cliff edge of life against a raging gale.

Rachel Cusk

In Kazuo Ishiguro's 1995 novel *The Unconsoled*, Ryder, a pianist, is due to give an important concert in a foreign city. The novel is written in the form of an extended anxiety dream: manifold impediments spring up to delay his arrival at the concert hall; at one point he realizes he hasn't practiced the pieces he intends to play. In a field outside the city where, through labyrinthine causes, he finds himself, he comes across the dilapidated wreck of his old childhood family car. "I stared through the spiderweb cracks [in the window] into the rear seat where I had once spent so many contented hours. Much of it, I could see, was covered with fungus." The elasticity of the subconscious is also the novel's elasticity – it is more than 500 pages long – and likewise the novel's procedures are those of its adopted system of Freudian values.

This tendency – which might be called a type of impersonation, a kind of camouflaging of the writer's authority and hence his responsibility – can be seen throughout Ishiguro's work, and goes hand in hand with his most persistent themes: the fear of disorganization and abandonment; the psychological aftermath of childhood; and the relationship between the institutional and the personal through which these themes are frequently dramatized. His most popular novel, *The Remains of the Day*, recommended itself to readers by the purity of its translation of that perennial English favorite, the period piece: here the author's lack of presence was felt to be impeccable, as discreet and thorough as the butler himself, serving up an England of which he didn't personally partake. But impersonation is also hubris, arrogance, control, for it seeks to undermine or evade the empathetic basis of shared experience. Without empathy, the impersonator can misjudge people quite as spectacularly as he second-guesses them: in Ishiguro's case, *The Unconsoled* bewildered and alienated the very readers *The Remains of the Day* had gone to such lengths to satisfy. And indeed, *The Unconsoled* can on one level be regarded as a sort of outburst, almost an act of personal aggression, though it is a lengthy and meticulous work.

Never Let Me Go is Ishiguro's sixth novel and has proved to be his most popular book since his Booker prize-winning heyday. As with *The Remains of the Day*, there is a film, replete with English celebrities. Ishiguro's ventriloquism announces itself in the novel's first lines: "My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year." The "now" and the "actually," the absorbed ordinariness, the vagueness of "they" and the precision of "eight months, until the end of this year": Ishiguro's ear is acute, and these are the verbal mannerisms of the public services sector in the humdrum modern world. Kathy is a "carer," and indeed the notion of the "caring professions" represents precisely that elision of the institutional and the personal that generates the undertone of disturbance in so much of his work. There are undertones of Kafka, too, in these words, and in the immediate sense they convey of the reader's imprisonment in the narrator, and thus of the narrator's actual powerlessness. Another elision is the humdrum and the sinister: triviality is the harbinger of evil, and Ishiguro's prose from the outset is conspicuously dull with trivia. Kathy calls the people she cares for "donors," and on the third page she says of one of them: "He'd just come through his third donation, it hadn't gone well, and he must have known he wasn't going to make it." And so the association, the elision, is swiftly clarified. This is a book about evil, the evil of death, the evil of banality: "he must have known he wasn't going to make it."

Never Let Me Go takes place in the late 20th century, in an England where human beings are cloned and bred for the purposes of harvesting their organs once they reach adulthood. These “clones” are reared in boarding school-type institutions: much is made, in the clone community, of the differences between one institution and another. Hailsham, where Kathy grew up as inmate before her “promotion,” is mythologized for its special ethos: a Hailsham childhood is idealized, with somewhat grotesque and faintly Dickensian sentimentality, by those who were “born” into less fortunate circumstances. Hailsham is a grand place whose ample grounds encompass a pond, a pavilion and, towards its perimeter fence, a sinister area known as “the woods.” It is staffed by “guardians” who have the quasi-parental function of the boarding school housemaster or mistress: these worthies bear the knowledge of their charges’ fate as best they can. Once the children have reached maturity they leave their school-type community and embark on a twilight adult life, in which they are given limited access to the normal world while they await the summons to make their first “donation.” This is where Kathy, as carer, comes in: she is the attending angel, seeing her portfolio of donors through the series of operations and consequent deteriorations that will lead to their certain death, or “completion.” This role has extended her own lease on life, and so she must endure the survivor's moral and emotional suffering. And indeed, it is her capacity for emotion that provides the narrative occasion, that makes her the writer of this account.

It would seem from this description that *Never Let Me Go* is a work of unremitting bleakness and gratuitous sordidity. At the very least the question might be asked what style of literary enterprise this is. It isn't science fiction – indeed its procedures are the very reverse of generic, for there is no analogy at work in the text, which instead labors to produce its iterative naturalism as a kind of sub-set or derivation of our own. In this sense it has more in common with a novel such as Camus's *The Plague*, in which a dystopian but familiar reality dramatizes the dilemmas of the age. But the dilemmas of our age are not really those of Ishiguro's dystopia: vainglorious science, meddling with the moral structure of life, is a kind of B-list spook whose antics have yet to offer any substantial intellectual or practical challenge to the populace.

In any case, the “scientific” basis of the novel is vague: it is the emotional world of the clones themselves that Ishiguro is interested in, for these are children without parents, children who lack the psychological burden of childhood that Ishiguro so painstakingly articulated in *The Unconsoled*. And what he concludes is that a child without parents has no defense against death; that its body is not sacred, that it is a force of pure mortality. The parent is a kind of god, sanctifying and redeeming the child: as in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the novel's horrific imaginings almost become a perverse kind of sentimentality, as though these (male) writers are unable entirely to distinguish between imagination and fear. The parent imagines the gruesome things that could happen to his child if he, the parent, weren't there to protect him; and the novelist tries to translate those imaginings into the empirical evidence valued by male literary culture. He creates a “reality” out of them, with every ghoulish component unrelentingly worked out and provided; a high-caste version of the tabloid newspaper's loving exposition of gory detail.

The Road has also been a popular success: readers seem to find the depressiveness of these novels exhilarating. In Ishiguro's case the “gory details” of organ donation and human exploitation are further freighted with the artistic scruples of the impersonator. The prose is locked tight with the inescapable repetitions of reminiscence: “There's an instance I can remember from when we were about eleven. We were in Room 7 on a sunny winter's morning. We'd just finished Mr. Roger's class,

and a few of us had stayed on to chat with him.” The greater part of the narrative proceeds thus, and Ishiguro gets his darkest effects from this “dead hand” approach, creating an atmosphere of unbearable constriction that is like looking back down a tunnel. But his simultaneous need to manipulate, to dramatize his own concerns, pulls the story in the opposite direction. He gives the world of Hailsham a dominant characteristic: the belief in, indeed the worshipping of, creativity. The Hailsham children are indoctrinated in – and, one suspects as the narrative progresses, deliberately blinded by – the belief that their personal worth and the meaningfulness of their lives resides entirely in their ability to create art. From their earliest years they paint and sculpt and write poetry; they “sell” their work to one another at passionate auctions known as “Exchanges”; the cream of the school’s production is selected to be sent to “the Gallery”, by a woman known as Madame, who comes two or three times a year in her smart clothes to make her choices. Kathy’s friend Tommy, though highly talented at sport, is bullied and ostracized for being bad at art; when he tells her that one of the guardians has privately suggested to him that his artistic failure doesn’t matter, she hears this as the cataclysm of heresy.

On one level Ishiguro seems to be saying that art is a con-trick, like religion; that it obscures from us the knowledge or awareness of our own mortality, knowledge that in the case of the Hailsham children is brutally withheld. We believe that art is immortal, and so we represent creativity as an absolute good; but in making this representation to children, are we interfering with their right to know about and accept death?

At one point Kathy remembers the way poems were treated as equivalent to paintings or sculptures at the Exchanges: it seems strange to her now that it should have been so. “We’d spend precious tokens on an exercise book full of that stuff rather than on something really nice for [putting] around our beds. If we were so keen on a person’s poetry, why didn’t we just borrow it and copy it down ourselves any old afternoon?” Ishiguro’s mask slips a little here: why go to such lengths to distinguish and devalue writing? Is he suggesting that this is what the culture does? Or is it the reverse, a further piece of evidence of the inside-out, perverted values of the novel’s world?

Never Let Me Go, like the clones it portrays, has in the end something of a double nature, for it both attracts and annihilates. Or perhaps it is a book that requires two readers, the reader who can be blind to its ugly visage, and the reader who can see into its delicately conflicted soul. For those who perceive the latter, the novel’s bleak horror will leave a bruise on the mind, a fetter on the heart.