

## NEVER LET ME GO READER'S GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. We hope they will aid your understanding of this devastating novel of innocence, knowledge, and loss.

1. Why is it important for Kathy to seek out donors who are "from the past," "people from Hailsham"? She learns from a donor who'd grown up at an awful place in Dorset that she and her friends at Hailsham had been really "lucky". How does the irony of this designation grow as the novel goes on? What does Hailsham represent for Kathy, and why does she say at the end that Hailsham is "something no one can take away"?
2. Kathy's narration is the key to the novel's disquieting effect. First person narration establishes a kind of intimacy between narrator and reader. What is it like having direct access to Kathy's mind and feelings? How would the novel be different if narrated from Tommy's point of view, or Ruth's, or Miss Emily's?
3. What are some of Ruth's most striking character traits? How might her social behavior, at Hailsham and later at the Cottages, be explained? Why does she seek her "possible" so earnestly?
4. One of the most notable aspects of life at Hailsham is the power of the group. Students watch each other carefully and try on different poses, attitudes, and ways of speaking. Is this behavior typical of most adolescents, or is there something different about the way the students at Hailsham seek to conform?
5. How do Madame and Miss Emily react to Kathy and Tommy when they come to request a deferral? Defending her work at Hailsham, Miss Emily says, "Look at you both now! You've had good lives, you're educated and cultured". What is revealed in this extended conversation, and how do these revelations affect your experience of the story?
6. After their visit to Miss Emily and Madame, Kathy tells Tommy that his fits of rage might be explained by the fact that "at some level you always knew". Does this imply that Kathy didn't? Does it imply that Tommy is more perceptive than Kathy?

7. The teacher Lucy Wainright wanted to make the children more aware of the future that awaited them. Miss Emily believed that in hiding the truth, "We were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by sheltering you.... Sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you.... But...we gave you your childhoods". In the context of the story as a whole, is this a valid argument?
8. Some reviewers have expressed surprise that Kathy, Tommy, and their friends never try to escape their ultimate fate. They cling to the possibility of deferral, but never attempt to vanish into the world of freedom that they view from a distance. Why might Ishiguro have chosen to present them as fully resigned to their early deaths?
9. Reread the novel's final paragraph, in which Kathy describes a flat, windswept field with a barbed wire fence "where all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled." She imagines Tommy appearing here in "the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up". What does the final sentence indicate about Kathy's state of mind as she faces her losses and her own death?
10. Does the novel examine the possibility of human cloning as a legitimate question for medical ethics, or does it demonstrate that the human costs of cloning are morally repellent, and therefore impossible for science to pursue? What kind of moral and emotional responses does the novel provoke? If you extend the scope of the book's critique, what are its implications for our own society?
11. In an interview, Ishiguro talked about *Never Let Me Go*: "There are things I am more interested in than the clone thing. How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? ...Most of the things that concern them concern us all, but with them it is concentrated into this relatively short period of time. These are things that really interest me and, having come to the realization that I probably have limited opportunities to explore these things, that's what I want to concentrate on." How do these remarks relate to your own ideas about the book? [Interview with Nicholas Wroe, *The Guardian*, February 2, 2005.]

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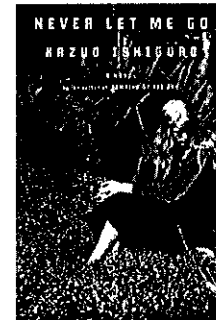
**Book:** Never let me go (Apr 2005)

**Author:** Ishiguro, Kazuo, 1954-

Adults  Fiction



**Description:** A reunion with two childhood friends--Ruth and Tommy--draws Kath and her companions on a nostalgic odyssey into the supposedly idyllic years of their lives at Hailsham, an isolated private school in the serene English countryside, and a dramatic confrontation with the truth about their childhoods and about their lives in the present.



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**Book Appeal Terms:** Definition of Appeal Terms

**Genre:** Adult books for young adults; Books to movies; Literary fiction; Psychological suspense stories; Science fiction; Suspense stories

14124 reviews

**Storyline:** Character-driven

**Tone:** Disturbing; Moving; Reflective

**Writing Style:** Lyrical; Stylistically complex; Thoughtful

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**Database:** NoveList

#### BookList:

Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth were once classmates at Hailsham, a private school in the English countryside with a most unusual student body: human clones created solely to serve as organ donors. "You were brought into this world for a purpose," advised Miss Lucy, one of Hailsham's guardians, "and your futures, all of them, have been decided." The tightly knit trio experienced love, loss, and betrayal as they pondered their destinies (to become "carers" for other donors and, eventually, donors themselves). The novel is narrated by Kathy, now 31 and a "carer," who recalls how Hailsham students were "told and not told" about their precarious circumstances. (Why were their writings and paintings so important? And who was the mysterious Madame who carted their creations away?) Ishiguro's provocative subject matter and taut, potent prose have earned him multiple literary decorations, including the French government's Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and an Order of the British Empire for service to literature. (His Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Remains of the Day*, was adapted into a critically acclaimed film). In this luminous offering, he nimbly navigates the landscape of emotion--the inevitable link between present and past and the fine line between compassion and cruelty, pleasure and pain. -- Allison Block (BookList, 01-01-2005, p783)

**School Library Journal:**

Adult/High School –The elegance of Ishiguro's prose and the pitch-perfect voice of his narrator conspire to usher readers convincingly into the remembered world of Hailsham, a British boarding school for "special students." The reminiscence is told from the point of view of Kathy H., now 31, whose evocation of the sheltered estate's sunlit rolling hills, guardians, dormitories, and sports pavilions is imbued with undercurrents of muted tension and foreboding that presage a darker reality. As an adult, Kathy re-engages in lapsed friendships with classmates Ruth and Tommy, examining the details of their shared youth and revisiting with growing awareness the clues and anecdotal evidence apparent to them even as youngsters that they were "different" from everyone outside. Ultimately, readers learn that the Hailsham children are clones, raised solely for the purpose of medical harvesting of organs, their lifespan circumscribed by years when they are designated as carers, followed by a short period as active donors, culminating in what is obliquely referred to as "completion." The recovery centers where Kathy serves as a carer for Ruth and then Tommy provide the setting for the latter half of the novel, defining the distinct rhythms and tenor of their days much as Hailsham did when they were young. Ishiguro conveys with exquisite sensitivity the emotional texture of the threesome's relationship, their bonds of personal loyalty that overcome fractures of trust, the palpable boundaries of hope, and the human capacity for forgiveness. Highly recommended for literary merit and as an exceptional platform for the discussion of a controversial topic.—Lynn Nutwell, Fairfax City Regional Library, VA --Lynn Nutwell (Reviewed August 1, 2005) (School Library Journal, vol 51, issue 8, p151)

**Publishers Weekly:**

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Like Ishiguro's previous works (*The Remains of the Day* ; *When We Were Orphans* ), his sixth novel is so exquisitely observed that even the most workaday objects and interactions are infused with a luminous, humming otherworldliness. The dystopian story it tells, meanwhile, gives it a different kind of electric charge. Set in late 1990s England, in a parallel universe in which humans are cloned and raised expressly to "donate" their healthy organs and thus eradicate disease from the normal population, this is an epic ethical horror story, told in devastatingly poignant miniature. By age 31, narrator (and clone) Kathy H has spent nearly 12 years as a "carer" to dozens of "donors." Knowing that her number is sure to come up soon, she recounts—in excruciating detail—the fraught, minute dramas of her happily sheltered childhood and adolescence at Hailsham, an idyllic, isolated school/orphanage where clone-students are encouraged to make art and feel special. Protected (as is the reader, at first) from the full truth about their eventual purpose in the larger world, "we [students] were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly." This tension of knowing-without-knowing permeates all of the students' tense, sweetly innocent interactions, especially Kath's touchingly stilted love triangle with two Hailsham classmates, manipulative Ruth and kind-hearted Tommy. In savoring the subtle shades of atmosphere and innuendo in these three small, tightly bound lives, Ishiguro spins a stinging cautionary tale of science outpacing ethics. Agent, Amanda Urban at ICM. 100,000 first printing; 9-city author tour. (Apr. 11) --Staff (Reviewed January 31, 2005) (Publishers Weekly, vol 252, issue 5, p46)

**Library Journal:**

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Ishiguro's previous novels, including the Booker Prize-winning *The Remains of the Day* and *A Pale View of the Hills* , have been exquisite studies of microcosmic worlds whose inhabitants struggle with loss and love, despair and hope. Above all, his characters strive to forge an enduring self-identity that can withstand the blows of an uncaring world. His new novel centers on one such character, Kathy H., and her attempts not only to find herself but also to understand her role in a mysterious world whose meanings she often fails to comprehend. As a child, Kathy H. attended Hailsham, a private preparatory school whose teachers and guardians sheltered the students from reality. Now 31, Kathy has assumed the position for which she was trained at Hailsham so long ago, and she has put the memories of her Hailsham days out of her mind. When she is thrown together with two of her old school friends, she begins to relive experiences that both call into question her friendships and deepen them. Her memories reveal also that the pastoral and pleasant Hailsham harbored dark and mysterious secrets that she now can begin to understand. Ishiguro's elegant prose and masterly ways with characterization make for a lovely tale of memory, self-understanding, and love. [See Prepub Alert, LJ 9/1/04.]—Henry L. Carrigan Jr., Lancaster, PA --Henry L. Carrigan Jr. (Reviewed January 15, 2005) (Library Journal, vol 130, issue 1, p98)



**Title:** Never Let Me Go

**Document Type:** Book Discussion Guides

**Description:** In some ways, this story, set in England in the 1990s, is simply the story of three students — a girl (Kathy) who likes a boy (Tommy), who unfortunately is already going out with someone else (Ruth), who is supposed to be Kathy's best friend, but has a pretty funny way of showing it — at a boarding school named Hailsham....

Adults  Teens  Fiction

**Contributed By:** Chung, Teresa Younga

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**Database:** NoveList

*NoveList* Book Discussion Guide  
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## ***Never Let Me Go***

by  
**Kazuo Ishiguro**  
(New York: Knopf, 2005)

### **Author:**

Born 1954 in Nagasaki, Japan, Kazuo Ishiguro has lived in Great Britain since 1960, when his father took a job with the British government. He holds a B.A. in English and philosophy from the University of Kent (1978), and an M.A. in creative writing from the University of East Anglia (1980). He worked for a number of years as a social worker, in Glasgow and then London, before he became a full-time writer. Now, he and his wife and their daughter live in London.

Ishiguro is the author of six novels: *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995), *When We Were Orphans* (2001), and *Never Let Me Go* (2005). His first two novels — both set in Japan — drew much critical acclaim, but it was the third that won him Britain's highest literary honor, the Booker Prize, and secured his reputation as a leading contemporary British novelist. Ishiguro's work since *The Remains of the Day*, which was made into a highly regarded film, has met with less than unanimous praise. Many critics were disappointed in the fourth novel; others simply did not know what to make of it. And his use of — or allusion to — specific generic conventions in his fifth and sixth novels — the detective novel in *When We Were Orphans* and the science fiction novel in *Never Let Me Go* — has drawn politely puzzled or skeptical reactions.

Certain themes and techniques can be found throughout Ishiguro's work. He almost always employs an unreliable narrator — Kathy in *Never Let Me Go* is the exception — through whom he explores the importance of memory for a sense of self. As literary scholar Barry Lewis writes, "notions of identity and how an individual sustains a sense of self as historical circumstances cast a new light on events is something he returns to time and again. It links to the sense of how memory might be used as tool to keep your dignity and maintain a sense of self" ([books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,1417665,00.html](http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,1417665,00.html)).

Ishiguro has also shown himself to be very interested in the ways that an individual's sense of self often depends upon how he or she understands his or her place in a larger social order.

Another distinguishing feature of Ishiguro's novels is his prose style. Compact, elliptical, leaving so much unsaid, it has often been characterized as somehow particularly Japanese. He has confessed to some impatience at this stereotyping. He concedes, however, that precisely this tendency to see him as a Japanese author may have been responsible in part for his early success. "It was because I had this Japanese face and this Japanese name and it was what was being covered at the time," he explained in a 1991 interview with the *Mississippi Review* (volume 20, no. 1-2). And in a 2000 interview with *January Magazine*, he elaborated, "Around the time when I started to write, I think people [British readers] came to this realization: We're not the center of the universe. I think it was that big shift, the basic realization that Britain wasn't the heart of an Empire, but just a little — albeit a powerful one, still — just a little country" ([www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/ishiguro.html](http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/ishiguro.html)).

Curiously, some critics have labeled Ishiguro a realist. Others have objected to such labeling, pointing to his spare prose style, which lacks much descriptive detail. Indeed, some have positively bemoaned the absence of facts. In the *Times Literary Supplement* (19 February 1982), for instance, Paul Bailey opined, "at certain points I could have done with something as crude as a fact." Ishiguro himself has never really sought to be a realist. He is simply more interested in the individual's psychology than the world outside. In this sense, it would be more appropriate to call him a fabulist, like Kafka or Beckett, as Louis Menand does, in the *New Yorker's* review of *Never Let Me Go* (March 28, 2005).

Ishiguro has offered other explanations for the absence of concrete details in his work. It has to do, he explained in an interview with *January Magazine*, with the prevalence of visual media and the globalization of culture. There, Ishiguro admitted to taking advantage of the fact that there are so many images, so many visual stereotypes, that can function as "a common literary shorthand." Thus, instead of laboring as a nineteenth-century realist novelist, describing things in minute detail, he need only write "a few little key words, evoke certain images." Ishiguro said that he is also aware of the global reach of literature in translation. Thus, he not only consciously avoids puns that work only in English, but also describes characters in terms of the specifics of time and place. "I wouldn't portray them in terms of which restaurants they hang out at, because you wouldn't know what that means, let alone someone in Kuala Lumpur" ([www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/ishiguro.html](http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/ishiguro.html)).

## Summary:

In some ways, this story, set in England in the 1990s, is simply the story of three students — a girl (Kathy) who likes a boy (Tommy), who unfortunately is already going out with someone else (Ruth), who is supposed to be Kathy's best friend, but has a pretty funny way of showing it — at a boarding school named Hailsham. At first, Kathy and Ruth are the best of friends. With her vivid imagination, Ruth creates fantastical worlds and Kathy's willingness to participate in and sustain these fictions forms the bedrock of their friendship. One day, Kathy befriends Tommy, who is a star athlete with no artistic talent to speak of, the butt of any number of jokes, all of which set off his violent temper. As the children grow into teenagers, Ruth and Tommy become a couple. And Kathy finds herself testing the boundaries of the imaginary world that she shares with Ruth. Instead, she turns more and more often to Tommy, who, like her, has begun to have

doubts about all that they have been taught at school. When the three leave school to move into a run-down farmhouse, the Cottages, their friendships begin to unravel. And when Ruth tricks Kathy into betraying Tommy, they move apart.

Many years later the three meet again, and Ruth apologizes for keeping the other two apart. After Ruth's death, Kathy and Tommy finally become a couple and begin to seek out the answers to all their childhood questions. They eventually learn that they are clones, created for the sole purpose of the vital organs that they can contribute to needy recipients. Not all clones — or "students" — are so fortunate as to grow up on estates like Hailsham minded by kind-hearted guardians. Some are "raised" in prison-like state-run institutions. Yet all clones end up sooner or later as first carers, who race about the countryside between hospitals and centers, nursing various donors, accompanying them through their first, second, third, and fourth (the last) donations, until they reach "completion" (i.e., until the donor's death). Then, after a few years as carers, the carers themselves become donors. This is the story of how Kathy and Tommy find out about what their futures hold, and more importantly, how they come to terms with it, struggling against an oppressive sense of opportunities lost that threatens to destroy whatever little time they have left together.

### Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

#### How can the emphasis upon art and creativity be explained?

Art has a number of functions in the novel. In the first place, it functions as an object of exchange. At Hailsham, students not only spend much time producing art, but their art is the basis of the "Exchanges," which is the sole source of personal possessions. At the Exchanges, students receive tokens for their own artwork, which they can then use to "purchase" the work created by other students. As Kathy points out, "the students were "dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private treasures" (p. 16). Being uncreative — like Tommy — means being unable to participate in many reciprocal relations. He has nothing for which he can receive tokens; and without tokens, he can not obtain anybody else's work.

Art also functions as an expressive medium. At the Cottages, Tommy guesses that the students' art is meant to be used to determine which couples will receive deferrals — i.e., a few years before they must begin their scheduled donations — because the art will reveal their souls, and show whether they are truly in love or not (p. 175). In this, he shares Miss Emily's — the head guardian's — belief in the expressive power of art. While Miss Emily has to disappoint him in the matter of the deferrals — there is no such thing — she does believe that art is expressive. As she explains, "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all" (p. 260). However, there is a problem with this expressive understanding of art, which the book does not really explore. If being artistic is the proof of a soul, what are we to make of people who like Tommy have little artistic talent? Does this mean that they do not have souls? Or that they do not have souls worth saving? This also points to the problem with saying that being human consists of any one thing.

There is yet a third understanding of art, one offered by Miss Lucy, a rather maverick guardian. Miss Lucy tells Tommy that she regrets having told him earlier that it does not matter so much whether he can produce good art or not. She says, "your art, it is important. And not just because it's evidence. But for your own sake. You'll get a lot from it, just for yourself" (p. 108). And it is this function of art that Ishiguro mentions in an interview with *Sigla* magazine: "Art is one

of the major ways in which we try to give meaning to our lives." It gives "us a sense of dignity and achievement." He points out, however, that it is not the way art functions in this particular novel: "In this book the art doesn't do that" ([www.siglamag.com/arts/0504/Kazuo-Ishiguro.php](http://www.siglamag.com/arts/0504/Kazuo-Ishiguro.php)).

### **What might be the significance of the myth of deferrals for couples in love?**

Kathy first hears of such deferrals during her time at the Cottages. On a trip to Norfolk, older students ("veterans") Chrissie and Rodney tell Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy that they have heard rumors that Hailsham students can apply to put off their donations for two or three years. Only couples, however, can qualify, couples in love. As Chrissie explains, "If you were a boy and a girl, and you were in love with each other, really, properly in love, and if you could show it, then the people who run Hailsham, they sorted it out for you. They sorted it out so you could have a few years together before you began your donations" (p. 153). At the end of the book, Miss Emily explains that it is just a rumor, that there is absolutely no basis for this belief in fact. However, it has been impossible to eradicate the rumor: "I think it's one that gets created from scratch over and over. You go to the source, stamp it out, you'll not stop it starting again elsewhere" (p. 258).

Certainly, this myth emphasizes the ways in which the novel is a love story, not a science fiction novel exploring the ethical issues of cloning. The myth underscores the prevalence of the belief in the saving power of love, that it can even overcome death. In his interview with Sigla magazine, Ishiguro talks about this belief. He names love along with art as "things in life that we focus on because they give us a sense of dignity and achievement" ([www.siglamag.com/arts/0504/Kazuo-Ishiguro.php](http://www.siglamag.com/arts/0504/Kazuo-Ishiguro.php)).

This novel undermines that belief; it points to the limits of what love can achieve. As Ishiguro puts it, "Sometimes we try to believe that they [love and art] can achieve more than they actually can"

([www.siglamag.com/arts/0504/Kazuo-Ishiguro.php](http://www.siglamag.com/arts/0504/Kazuo-Ishiguro.php)).

In the end, we learn that the rumor is just a rumor. There are no deferrals for couples in love. Ironically, it is not love that defers death; rather, it is love itself — the love between Kathy and Tommy — that is deferred again and again, as Ruth succeeds in always keeping them apart.

### **How is the students' inability to have children significant?**

As usual, Ishiguro does not get into the specifics. We do not know, for instance, whether this sterility is by design or accident. However, what is clear in the book is that in the outside world, in contrast to the world of the students and donors, sex is equated with having babies. This, according to Miss Emily, the head guardian, is the reason why sex is so meaningful. The students are told that "out there sex meant all sorts of things. ... And the reason it meant so much ... was because the people out there ... could have babies from sex" (p. 84). There is a strange symmetry, here. As clones, the students are not the result of any sexual activity, and their own sexual activity does not result in children. In both ways, they represent the decoupling of traditionally linked notions, sex and reproduction. This would explain some of the prejudice against the students. Since sex and reproduction are so tied up with each other, reproduction without sex — e.g., cloning — must be unnatural. Sadly, the students themselves appear to adopt the prejudices of the larger society. After all, if sexuality is not tied to reproduction, why should homosexuality be any different from heterosexuality? Yet, according to Kathy, "Gay sex, incidentally, was something we were even more confused about. ... at Hailsham we definitely weren't at all kind towards any signs of gay stuff" (p. 96). There is a certain irony in the students practicing the very prejudices of which they are the unwitting targets.

### **In what ways is Miss Emily right when she describes Hailsham as "a more humane and better way of doing things" (p. 258)?**

In some ways, Hailsham students do have things much better than other clones. They have no desire to escape, as it is implied other students elsewhere have done. The Hailsham students do



not suffer from horrible accidents as a result of trying to climb over electrified fences (p. 78). Instead, they spend their time studying, playing, and bickering among themselves. And thus they can joke about World War II concentration camp inmates and the temptation they must have felt to commit suicide by simply approaching the electrified fences. From what Kathy H. recalls — and we are not led in any way to think that she is romanticizing her time at Hailsham — she and the others all seem to have been very happy, very content.

However, while Hailsham's methods are certainly more humane, this is not to say that the students are treated as fully human. After all, they are hardly being told exactly what is in store for them. Knowledge is usually withheld, and when it is given, it is given in piecemeal, distorted fashion. Their contentment depends upon their remaining ignorant. In contrast, Miss Lucy thinks they should know, so that they can make their own choices. In other words, she wants to treat them as human beings instead of dumb animals. Moreover, no matter how well the students are treated, they are still being bred in order to be used, created in order to be killed. A good parallel is the question how to treat animals such as cattle, pigs, or chickens. Many who advocate for more humane treatment do not desire to end the breeding, slaughter, and consumption of these animals altogether.

Indeed, the very premise of "more humane" treatment of clones rests upon a sort of oxymoron. Miss Emily contends, "We demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being" (p. 261). However, the whole notion of humane treatment implies that clones are humans, or like enough to deserve to be treated like humans. Yet, once clones were acknowledged to be "as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being," then the whole cloning project would have to stop: to use clones as donors — harvesting them for their vital organs — is definitely not to treat them as human beings, no matter how kindly one treats them. If Miss Emily has really succeeded in what she set out to do, it would not have meant a better way of doing things, but the cessation of "donations" altogether.

#### **What are we to make of the students' acceptance of the purpose imposed upon them?**

The students frequently talk of donating as what they are supposed to be doing. For instance, Kathy explains how, after a while at the Cottages, all the students eventually sought out training to become carers, giving in to "a growing sense this was the natural course to follow" (p. 197). And Ruth tells Kathy and Tommy that after five years of being a carer, she was ready for her donations: "It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" (p. 227). In some ways this sounds inexplicable. How can they accept that they will die so easily? Why do they not fight? Why do they not rage against their deaths?

An answer can be found in a very telling exchange between Kathy and Tommy. He asks her whether she is not tired of being a carer, and really whether it makes a difference to be a good carer, or to have carers at all. He says, "But is it really that important? Okay, it's really nice to have a good carer. But in the end, is it really so important? The donors will all donate, just the same, and then they'll complete." To which Kathy quickly responds, "Of course it's important. A good carer makes a big difference to what a donor's life's actually like" (p. 282). While Tommy is focused only on the end — their eventual deaths — and thinks that nothing matters since that end will not change, Kathy seems to be saying that things do matter, despite the fact that they cannot change what will eventually come. In this, Kathy's position is similar to Miss Lucy's. Back at Hailsham, Miss Lucy had said, "If you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you" (p. 81). Knowledge is important, however, not because knowing their end, they can then change it, but rather because knowing one's end, one can choose to try to meet it with a certain measure of grace and dignity.

Ishiguro has addressed this point in various interviews:

- ★ It was a very important feature that escape was not an option. It's about how we're all aware of our fate, in that we have a limited time in life. Escape isn't an issue in

the book, because it's never really an option in our own lives. Characters like Stevens and the kids in *Never Let Me Go* do what we all do: try to give meaning to our lives by fulfilling some sort of duty.  
([www.siglamag.com/arts/0504/Kazuo-Ishiguro.php](http://www.siglamag.com/arts/0504/Kazuo-Ishiguro.php))

In other words, the meaning of the novel would seem to depend upon a parallel. The students cannot escape their fate; no more can we escape our mortality. In writing the novel, Ishiguro explores the questions, "How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? ... Most of the things that concern them concern us all"

([books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,1417665,00.html](http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,1417665,00.html)).

One might, however, find Ishiguro's strategy rather disturbing, for it seems to invite us to believe that the practice of cloning, as portrayed in the book, is somehow as inevitable as death. Of course, it is not — not in real life and not in the book (or, at least, Ishiguro does not do a good job convincing us that it is inevitable in the book). Thus, one finds oneself reluctant to accept the students' acquiescence as dignified and purposeful.

### **What is the book saying about childhood?**

Miss Emily says to Kathy and Tommy, "We gave you your childhoods. . . . You wouldn't be who you are today if we'd not protected you. You wouldn't have become absorbed in your lessons, you wouldn't have lost yourselves in your art and your writing" (p. 268). In this passage, Miss Emily would seem to be saying that isolation and deception are not only benign, but essential to a happy childhood. And in interviews, Ishiguro has voiced this view, saying that Hailsham "serves as a very good metaphor for childhood"

([www.bookbrowse.com/author\\_interviews/full/index.cfm?author\\_number=477](http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=477)).

Hailsham students are treated much as children everywhere are treated. Children are often sheltered from "the real world," usually for what is taken to be their own good, and such sheltering usually involves smaller or larger deceptions. One might argue, however, that Ishiguro overlooks some of the rather negative aspects of this sort of childhood isolation. The isolation and deception do not always work to the child's advantage or benefit. Within the "shelter" of childhood, they can all too easily be taught to believe any number of things potentially dangerous to themselves. Hailsham students do not seem to be able to imagine rejecting their purpose as donors, as they were meant to be. Could this be because their "protected" childhood equipped them with no other means of reacting? In a way, because they had such an idyllic childhood, they seem almost paralyzed when confronted with the less than welcoming world outside. Hailsham, one could argue, vividly portrays the vulnerability of children to deep levels of indoctrination.

### **What is the significance of the title?**

Literally, the title of the novel is taken from a song that Kathy treasures, a song whose lyrics do not matter so much as the one line, "Baby, baby, never let me go" (p. 70). As she listens to these lines, she imagines a woman holding a baby in her arms, afraid the child will be taken from her, but this is a potentially misleading image. Kathy is not the mother afraid of her child being taken away, but rather the child who fears being abandoned. The mysterious Madame sees things more clearly, perhaps: "When I watched you dancing that day, I saw . . . a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go" (p. 272).

True, this "old kind world" is in many ways a fiction, but it is not the delusion of an individual. Rather, it is a collective fiction. That is, it is a fiction that must be shared by others. And precisely because it is believed by others, it has a sort of reality that the delusions of an individual do not. There are many such collective fictions in the novel, ranging from simple childhood make-believe games (e.g., Ruth's stable of horses) to the more complex game of the secret guard (the cadre of friends that Ruth forms to protect Miss Geraldine, her favorite guardian). Being Ruth's friend

means playing a part in sustaining the fiction. As Kathy admits, "The truth was, those of us who'd grown close to her, we each played our part in preserving the fantasy and making it last for as long as possible" (p. 52). Being friends means not asking bothersome questions that might puncture the bubble of the fictions that make up their lives at Hailsham and the Cottages. They keep, for instance, to a "discreet agreement" (p. 97) not to inquire too directly into friends' sex lives and an "unspoken agreement" (p. 123) not to question each other too closely about the books one is supposed to have read.

In the novel, such illusions are presented as useful, as helpful, as much less damaging than the truth. Specifically, the refusal to participate in a collective fiction is often cast as doing harm to one's friends. Having challenged Ruth about the pencil case, Kathy is bewildered by her own actions: "And suddenly my behaviour seemed to me utterly baffling. All this effort, all this planning, just to upset my dearest friend. So what if she'd fibbed a little" (p. 60). Telling the truth almost always results in hurting someone, while not telling the truth keeps them from harm. So that, for instance, when Kathy considers telling Tommy that others are pulling his leg, she ultimately decides against doing so: "I suppose the main thing was that I didn't want to upset him. Because I could see, for all his anxiety about his elbow, Tommy was touched by all the concern he believed had been shown him" (p. 87). Telling the truth is associated not with an interest in the truth, but rather with the intent to break ranks and hurt one's friends. The plea — never to let go — seems to be directed to one's friends, the one's with whom one shares collective fictions.

### **What if anything is Ishiguro saying about the "outside" world, the world of non-students and non-donors?**

On one hand, it would seem that students and donors have some interaction with the world beyond. After all, they take interaction classes in which they learn to play-act "outside" roles. And they are warned about how outsiders feel about sex (p. 84), which would seem to suggest that they have sex with outsiders. On the other hand, they are mostly isolated, as students at Hailsham and then at the Cottages. And even when they race around as carers or are being carted around as donors, there seems very little interaction with the doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff. This isolation seems significant, as if the world outside must keep them separate and apart. This would seem to be Miss Emily's point: "People did their best not to think about you" (p. 263). Close interaction would force upon the "outside" world the knowledge that donors are human, and that they should not be subjected to this sort of treatment. Perhaps, the novel also points to a hint of self-loathing. We know that Madame feels revulsion at the clones. Kathy recalls having to confront as a young girl the knowledge that "there are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you — of how you were brought into this world and why" (p. 36). What repels Madame and people like her is perhaps not the clones themselves, but the self-knowledge that the clones force upon them. We know from Miss Emily's explanation that the clones make it possible "to cure so many previously incurable conditions. This was what the world noticed the most, wanted the most" (p. 262). But no matter the benefits — What does it say about a society that it would use some of its members in this way? Those who treat human beings as less than human are faced with an uncomfortable truth: their own lack of humanity.

### **Further Reading:**

#### **Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003)**

Booker Prize-winning author Atwood gives us a dark dystopic tale, in which brilliant geneticist Crake designs a virulent virus to wipe out the human race and engineers a new one, his own Adam and Eve, to take their place. The end of the world as we know it and the beginning of life in the new Eden are narrated by Snowman, a mysterious figure whose relation to both Crake and Oryx is slowly revealed over the course of the novel.

**★ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)**

In this futuristic novel — adapted into the science fiction film classic, *Blade Runner* — most animal species have become extinct; real and artificial animals are highly coveted as pets, and empathy with other life forms is the central tenet of a widespread religion called Mercerism. It is also used as the means to distinguish humans from human-like androids. As he chases after rogue androids in order to "retire" them, however, bounty hunter Rick Deckard begins to doubt many past certainties.

**Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993)**

Set in the post-World War II years, in a fictional Louisiana plantation region named Bayonne, this is the story of Grant Wiggins, a school teacher, and his attempts to help another young black man, Jefferson, who is condemned to die by an all-white jury for a murder he did not commit. Like Ishiguro, Gaines asks how one can meet one's death with dignity. Gaines's novel benefits, however, from a far greater sense of historical specificity.

**Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)**

In this novel, scientist Victor Frankenstein succeeds in creating an artificial human life. As soon as the creature awakes, however, a horrified Frankenstein abandons him. The forsaken creature, gentle at first, is embittered by the rejection he meets from all sides and finally vows to destroy the man who gave him his miserable existence. Shelley's novel underscores the creator's hubris and asks what the creator's obligations to his creation are.

**Jodi Picoult, *My Sister's Keeper* (2004)**

In a realistic contemporary setting, Picoult tells the story of Anna, who was conceived to be a perfect genetic match for her older sister, Kate, who lives with a rare form of leukemia. At age thirteen, after donating blood, bone marrow, and cells all her life, Anna has decided she wants to live a life free of Kate. Anna has never been asked by her parents for these biological donations: it is expected of her. To escape from this obligation, Anna must sue her parents for medical emancipation.

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*This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Teresa Younga Chung, who holds a PhD in Literature from Duke University and teaches in the English Department at Harper College.*

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*★ Archetype / Prototype by M.D. Waters*

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Kazuo Ishiguro's "Never Let Me Go" (Knopf; \$24) 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" (1989): 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" (1982) and "An Artist of the Floating World" (1986); an unidentified Central European town undergoing an indeterminate cultural crisis, in "The Unconsoled" (1995); Shanghai at the time of the Sino-Japanese War, in "When We Were Orphans" (2000). 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; 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.

LOUIS MENAND

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