



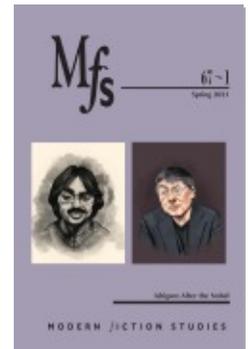
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On Rereading Kazuo Ishiguro

Chris Holmes and Kelly Mee Rich

To consider the career of a single author is necessarily an exercise in rereading. It means revisiting their work, certainly, but also, more carefully, studying how the impress of their authorship evolves over time, and what core elements remain that make them recognizably themselves. Of those authors writing today, Kazuo Ishiguro lends himself exceptionally well to rereading in part because his oeuvre, especially his novels, are so coherent. Featuring first-person narrators reflecting on the remains of their day, these protagonists struggle to come to terms with their participation in structures of harm, and do so with a formal complexity and tonal distance that suggests unreliability or a vexed relationship to their own place in the order of things. Ishiguro is also an impeccable re-reader, as the intertextuality of his prose suggests. He convincingly inhabits, as well as cleverly rewrites, existing genres such as the country house novel, the novel of manners, the English boarding school novel, the mystery novel, the bildungsroman, science fiction, and, most recently, Arthurian fantasy. Artist, detective, pianist, clone: to read Ishiguro always entails rereading in relation to his own oeuvre, as well as to the literary canon. His play with genre, form, and narrative, however subtly performed, always suggests a doubling, another vantage point from which we might look differently at his world and our own.

Reading Ishiguro thus means reading palimpsestically, feeling for traces of what came before. The same might also be said about

his fictive worlds, whose copies, echoes, and rememberings are key to their narrative shape and meaning. *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) introduces us to the uncanniness of doubled lives through the characters Etsuko and Sachiko. *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) develops this backward-looking narrative form through the artist Masuji Ono, who comes to terms with his role in producing imperial propaganda for wartime Japan. This acknowledgment is then perfected in *The Remains of the Day* through the butler, Stevens, and his trust in his previous employer and Nazi-sympathizer, Lord Darlington. *The Unconsoled* brings uncertain memory and double vision into the canon, with an artist not only uncertain of his own value to the world, but dubious of reality itself. *When We Were Orphans* showcases another method: the doubling of a keyword, in this case, “company” (3). Signifying both a bad way to get ahead in the world (through networking, rather than through individual labor), as well as the trading outfit that leads the protagonist’s parents to violent ends, the word is at the crux of the narrative reveal that its protagonist owed his success to the nefarious criminal underworld. *Never Let Me Go*, of course, pushes the boundaries of originality and repetition through its clones, who seek meaning in their lives through their art and pursuit of their “possibles” (139). The five stories comprising *Nocturnes* (2009) recall sonata form, with thematic resonances and characters that carry over from one to another. And though *The Buried Giant* (2015) shows Ishiguro experimenting in forgetting rather than remembrance, it still features the characteristic recall of the earlier novels. In fact, the stakes of rereading are even higher here, as the novel presents a world whose dangers stem from the inability to retain memory, resulting in characters puzzling to make sense over even the most recent events.

To characterize the experience of Ishiguro as rereading is not a critique. Think of Nabokov’s provocation that “one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it,” with the accompanying definition that “a good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader” (3). Surely this is an axiom for our scholarly work. Rereading is the backbone of academia, a profession built on practices of citation, close reading, syllabi formation, and debates over the literary canon. Rereading is also one of the pleasures of our job, as new projects and classrooms allow us to see familiar texts with fresh eyes. Perhaps it’s not too far off to say that we enter this profession in order to reread: to slow down, deepen our engagement, and indulge what Zadie Smith calls “an old desire, to possess a work entirely” (43). Then again, who has time to reread these days? There’s always more to add, more to discover, more to master: piles of bedside reading and

ever-growing lists that keep us moving forward rather than looking backward. This is especially the case for scholars of contemporary literature, who must read madly to keep up with expanding cultural markets. Yet there's also something private, even perverse, about rereading. The texts we turn to again and again are not always those we teach or study; indeed, they exist at a slant to our scholarly lives, offering forms of solace, escape, security, and identity. These intimate habits of rereading are crucial to our personal development, indexing various interests and decisions that have led us to where we are today.¹ If we are what we read, we are surely even more what and how we reread—a point Ishiguro understands and exploits in his fiction. For really, what is more central to his work than understanding how one reads?

The essayists collected here reread Ishiguro in our present moment in a variety of ways: in light of contemporary debates over methodology; the evolving fields of British and world literature; his relation to the archive, including his newly accessible collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin; and why it is we can't seem to let go of *Never Let Me Go*. But before elaborating on their concerns, we might first turn to two specific instances from Ishiguro himself—a pivotal scene in *The Remains of the Day* and his recent Nobel Prize acceptance speech—to reflect on how Ishiguro invests rereading with a critical charge.

Readers may recall the ending of *The Remains of the Day*, where Stevens finally voices that he had “given his best” (244) to Lord Darlington: an epiphanic insight into his own life that one could characterize as rereading. The whole novel has led to this inevitable realization, imbuing it with devastating emotional force, in part because he had passed on the possibility of deeper intimacy with his colleague Miss Kenton. Considered through the theme of rereading, one early scene stands out: Miss Kenton's discovery of Stevens in the pantry with a romance novel. In a lengthy defense to the reader, Stevens describes how these sentimental fictions store “elegant dialogue of much practical value” (168) to his professional development. And yet one senses that these readings are more clandestine and, indeed, regular than this. Though he describes himself as only reading a few pages at a time, he also betrays a fair knowledge of the plots and, moreover, an enjoyment in watching the characters fall in love. That this anecdote marks a turning point with Miss Kenton only heightens its symbolic value, reflecting the tension between Stevens's job as a butler and sentimental education. Squaring the two, we learn, turns out to be the defining failure of his life. Still, there's a real pleasure

in Stevens's reading, one that exceeds the reach of his profession and his acknowledged failure to make his own mistakes. There is something to be said for his enjoyment, however brief or undignified, which then speaks to our own position as readers: both the reasons why we say we read, as well as those other, more private ones.

If we turn, then, to Ishiguro's recent reflection on his own work—his Nobel Prize lecture, “My Twentieth Century Evening—and Other Small Breakthroughs”—it is perhaps no surprise that it is all about rereading. As the occasion demands, Ishiguro indulges his audience with a personal reflection on his career and what brought him to his present status. The talk begins with his graduate work in creative writing at the University of East Anglia, where he decided to write stories about Japan, including what would eventually be *A Pale View of Hills*. In characteristic style, Ishiguro observes himself at a distance: “Since then, I've often looked back and asked: what was going on with me? What was all this peculiar energy?” (3). To answer this, he says, we must return to his experience of growing up in England with Japanese parents, and, of course, being Japanese himself (“the first Japanese Head Chorister seen in Guildford” [4]). This initiated an increasingly creative relationship to his birth country, a reconstruction based on memory and projection that he aligns with the process of creative writing. Though this sort of temporal jump is in keeping with his style, it is unique within the Nobel speech, which afterward continues in chronological fashion. Indeed, if Ishiguro were a character in one of his novels, we would say this anecdote provides a privileged insight into his work: namely, that his career began with an impulse to write so that he could reread. As he puts it, he wished “to re-build [his] Japan in fiction, to make it safe, so that [he] could thereafter point to a book and say: ‘Yes, there's my Japan, inside there’” (6). He then carries this impulse into his representations of England, as he describes in an interview on *Never Let Me Go*, “I don't have a deep link with England . . . For me it is like a mythical place” (“For Me, England is a Mythical Place”). His writing is thus as doubly inscribed as the memories of his characters. The question, then, is what else does Ishiguro inscribe in his books that keeps us returning to them? Indeed, Ishiguro closes his lecture by challenging his relevancy, stating, “I'll be looking to the writers from the younger generations to inspire and lead us. This is their era, and they will have the knowledge and instinct about it that I will lack” (“My Twentieth Century Evening” 15). It is with this imprimatur that we pose the question at the heart of this special issue: how should we reread Ishiguro today?

Ishiguro Beyond Ishiguro: Repertoire, Prestige, Suspicion

If we reflect on the critical tradition Ishiguro has produced, we see that much of it grapples with rereading as a way to reflect on Ishiguro's relation to the very nature of the contemporary. Rebecca Walkowitz, for instance, situates Ishiguro in what she calls "comparison literature" (218), characterized by concerns over the scale of social life that dominates contemporary world literature. In Ishiguro's case, his works meditate on these issues through tropes of reproducibility and unoriginality, suggesting that we pay attention to the circulation of texts in reading networks. Anne Whitehead, featured in this issue, has offered a powerful account of Hailsham's humanities curriculum in *Never Let Me Go*, suggesting that reading literature restricts rather than expands the clones' imaginative faculties. Critiquing literature's pedagogical association with empathy, Whitehead suggests that the value of contemporary literature is in its power to destabilize readerly identification, so as to hold open various possibilities of responsibility and care. And in Bruce Robbins's account, Ishiguro's narrative cruelty is shown to be predicated on the inevitable, inexorable ways our lives are linked to the injuring of others. Robbins notes: "It's almost as if the emotional violence were so intolerable that, even in the act of repeating the story, Ishiguro also resisted giving it a memorable anecdotal form that could be easily abbreviated, cited, and circulated" (289). Whatever force his works carry, it insists on being felt anew, striking each reader in the moment of transmission. It's precisely this repetition that wounds us, in all its unoriginality or clichéd truth.

While earlier criticism was interested in theorizing the symbolic function of characters as they relate to the world around them, the essays in this special issue seek to open Ishiguro's author-function to the literary world around him, by discussing his place in literary criticism and field formation, or networks of cultural production. Whitehead begins with a minority report on Ishiguro's short fiction, insisting that they should be read alongside and as carefully as the novels that tend to dominate Ishiguro criticism. Her essay, "Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes*: Between Archive and Repertoire," turns on the distinction between the archive as a stable container of objects and the repertoire as a performance-based compendium, as per the musical use of the term. Whitehead's reading of *Nocturnes* traces Ishiguro's fascination with transmission and modification on both thematic and formal levels, resulting in a nuanced, polyphonic account of his short fiction that resonates with his broader oeuvre. This challenge to Ishiguro's status as monolithic author becomes especially important if we consider the nature of Ishiguro's own archive, housed in the

Harry Ransom Center. As Whitehead notes, his archive is impeccably curated to showcase his writerly authority, excising any reference to the literary networks that have shaped his reputation. Her essay thus serves as a salutary reminder that no author is an island, and that to read Ishiguro means considering him in a larger, more multifaceted system of cultural production.

Matthew Eatough speaks to the particularity of cultural capital in his essay, “‘Are They Going to Say This Is Fantasy?’: Kazuo Ishiguro, Untimely Genres, and the Making of Literary Prestige,” which examines Ishiguro’s relationship to the Booker Prize, a literary institution that has shaped notions of literary value, canonicity, and the very idea of British fiction. Ishiguro was vital to the shaping of what Eatough calls “the Booker generation” (40): a group of writers including Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, and Pat Barker, who revitalized late twentieth-century British literature with the shared concerns over the legacies of empire, the nature of public and private memory, and the idea of a national community. Since 2000, however, a new group of authors have entered the literary field, including Zadie Smith, Tom McCarthy, David Mitchell, Helen Oyeyemi, and Ali Smith, whose works move away from previous stylistic and thematic concerns to engage with more experimental form, intersectional identities, and new genres. Eatough provides an updated assessment of this new generation and Ishiguro’s place therein, turning to Ishiguro’s recent genre fiction as test cases in the influence of the Booker aesthetic. In doing so, Eatough offers a timely meditation on the continuing prestige of historicism for the literary field, which Ishiguro cannily (though perhaps unsuccessfully) adapts in his treatment of genre in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Buried Giant*.

And finally, if one pleasure of reading Ishiguro is that it is so immediately a rereading, confirming our suspicions while also playing with our expectations, then he provides a valuable test case in current debates over critical methods of literary interpretation as they play out through surface and depth, paranoid and reparative reading, weak and strong theory, and narration and description. What would it mean to be surprised by Ishiguro? What critical stance, or affective posture might we assume in order to re-establish our capacity for surprise? Doug Battersby’s essay, “Reading Ishiguro Today: Suspicion and Form,” brings Ishiguro’s work to bear on the current debates over critical method in literary criticism, particularly those over the concept of “suspicious reading” (67), as expressed through a text’s surface versus its illuminating depth. As Battersby notes, it’s nearly impossible not to use these reading tactics when it comes to Ishiguro

because his work is routinely celebrated as a masterful deployment of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Still, the essay invites us to complicate this critical mode by attending to the sheer variety of suspicions at hand, as well as to their accompanying affective intensities. Battersby identifies and elaborates on these different modes, showing how Ishiguro's oeuvre reflects an "increasingly sophisticated mobilization of readerly suspicion" (69). Ultimately, the essay suggests the need for a more pragmatic approach to literary criticism informed by affectively attuned close reading, instead of determining in advance what its stakes should be.

Ishiguro In and Out of World Literature

There is a near critical consensus that Ishiguro both belongs to world literature, as well as participates in fashioning the elements of what constitutes a world literature text.² He is without a doubt a pivotal figure in world literature's systems of cultural capital: his novels are international bestsellers, exist in hundreds of languages, and win literary prizes worldwide. And yet he is also an unlikely standard bearer for the new world literature and its kindred genre, the global novel. World literature today might loosely be described as texts on the move from their national origins, texts that cross boundaries—geographic, cultural, and linguistic—and texts that serve as an imaginative response to this mobility. This nascent genre of world literature represents and responds to the movement of people, culture, and language, often in the form of an explicit critique of globalization. But if the global novel can be loosely said to represent and invent a world in motion, the Ishiguro novel is its inverse: the literature of standing still. To live in an Ishiguro novel is to be frozen in place as society moves around you, either oblivious to your existence—to your cares, needs, and anxieties—or actively engaged in your undoing, for reasons that remain unclear. Perhaps this is why, in awarding Ishiguro the Nobel Prize, the committee stressed that the most striking element of his oeuvre was that it had "uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature 2017"). Critics have given attention to the many crosscurrents that connect Ishiguro's works of fiction, but it is the illusion of connection to the world that undergirds the oeuvre writ large. No matter the circumstances of the particular novel, the Ishiguro character is above all limited existentially, ontologically, and epistemologically. Dynamic though they may be, the worlds of Ishiguro's imagination remain opaque to his characters.

However, if the global novel purports to represent ways of being in a world propelled by the globalization of culture and capital, then perhaps its truest form, the inequality of experience of that mobility, is captured uniquely in Ishiguro's work. What, after all, is more defining of a globalized world than not understanding your position within it? In engaging with the remarkable essays that make up this special issue's reevaluation of Ishiguro's work after the Nobel Prize, what has become clear to us is that what defines Ishiguro's place in world literature is the contradiction of a fictional world on the move that remains inscrutable to the ordinary people who populate it. More emphatically put, Ishiguro may well offer us a blueprint for rereading and restructuring the idea of the world embedded in world literature, but he does so through a cartography of immobility, rather than what is assumed of a global novel, namely dynamic movement through and revelations about the world.

Consider the ways in which it is blindness rather than insight that drives the pathos in Ishiguro's work. There is the butler of *The Remains of the Day*, who is the son and grandson of butlers, reared in the very house in which he serves powerful men whose business and political motivations are mere whispers in the manor halls. *The Unconsoled* introduces us to the pianist who cannot remember his appointments, and whose relative fame does nothing to illuminate the purpose of his art. In contrast, the wartime painter in *An Artist of the Floating World* finds his work carrying an outsized importance in fascist propaganda for imperialist Japan, but he lacks the foresight to understand how his art draws him into a political ideology with which he will be stamped. Ishiguro has admitted an interest in how people tell "the story of their own lives to themselves and how they deceive themselves. How sometimes they wanted to look at shameful episodes from the past that they had participated in and other times they absolutely did not want to look at those things" ("Kazuo Ishiguro"). But it is at the nexus of self-deception and occlusion by unequal sociopolitical structures that the world in Ishiguro's world literature is revealed. Characters in novels as dissimilar as *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Buried Giant* struggle with related questions of historical memory. Even the detective of *When We Were Orphans* draws little historical illumination from the clues he follows in the disappearance of his parents from war-torn Shanghai. Historical trauma weighs heavily on Ishiguro's characters, but following the promise of an artifact or recollection rarely if ever leads to clarity or resolution, and the fog of memory, whether breathed by an errant dragon or conjured by the mind, settles in more thickly as the narrative progresses.

This is not to suggest that the reader's lot falls in with the character's ignorance of their world. To the contrary, as our contributors show, Ishiguro's work demands a rereading of those scenes of blindness in order to dismantle the expectations for how fiction should engage a world on the move. Mark Seltzer has called Ishiguro "the great contemporary novelist of the habitus of nonknowing, and its institutionalizations" (116), giving a name and a method to the abstraction and blindness that define the fundamental existence of all Ishiguro characters. Indeed, one need only listen to his narrators to hear them speak the quiet part out loud: it is what we do not or cannot understand about the world that most defines our place within its hierarchies. Ishiguro returns to this conclusion again and again with his most absorbing narrators. But in drawing attention to his characters' limitations, he also issues an invitation to the reader to scrutinize these limitations and the unequal vantage on the workings of the world that is and is not their own.

Those moments of hyper-awareness are the principal pathos of these fictions, and they are catalysts to the most pressing theoretical interventions into Ishiguro's work. Here are some brief examples: Stevens reacts to a cruel jibe from a visiting dignitary about his knowledge of global affairs with a comment on the limits placed on ordinary people: "There is, after all, a real limit to how much ordinary people can learn and know, and to demand that each and every one of them contribute 'strong opinions' to the great debates of the nation cannot, surely, be wise" (194). And it is his ordinary abstraction from the methods of global capital, as a servant, and as a man defined by his limits that prompts us to question globalization's unequal apportionment of information and capital. Ryder, *The Unconsoled's* virtuoso pianist, in what can only be called fall-on-your-face moment of irony, advises that a musician "should not, in any case, attempt to make a virtue out of one's limitations" (201). He will, memorably, spend the novel's 500-plus pages engaged in an exercise in self-defeat and failure to achieve self-awareness, including the hilarious appearance and disappearance of the crucial schedule he is meant to follow for the duration of his trip to Eastern Europe. His inability to acclimate to the temporal shifts of the narrative begs the question, how does art, pitched at full modernist tilt, participate in assimilating us to world time? *Never Let Me Go's* Kathy H., in a haunting admission of her blindness to the world outside Hailsham, asks the reader, "how was it where you were?" (13), in the hopes of finding a recognizable pairing for her experience of the world's cruelty. Even if we are, as Ishiguro himself suggests, clones like Kathy H., she is unable to hear

our warnings, and it is our own blindness to which we must attend. Or, as Martin Puchner succinctly puts it, “by including us in this world of clones, Ishiguro forces the reader to question the essence and the limits of the human. Perhaps that is what we are supposed to do” (49).

One of the critical blind spots in Ishiguro’s own reception adheres to the question of his Japaneseness. Ishiguro’s engagement with and participation in world literature has largely been associated with the novels after his 1989 *The Remains of the Day*. However, his early novels are, for the essayists here, catalysts to rereading the ways in which national and transnational histories have been read or ignored in criticism on Ishiguro to this moment. One of the more central and controversial strains of criticism that predominated treatments of Ishiguro’s early career concerns his cultural belonging—born in Nagasaki, raised in England—and the import of that dual belonging on his treatment of Japan, specifically in his first two novels *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*. As Rebecca Suter puts it in her study of the early novels, “from the beginning of his literary career, critics have scrutinized Ishiguro’s novels looking for traces of his Japanese and British cultural belonging, often trying to attribute specific elements to one or the other tradition” (11). This approach to his relationship to Japan and his literary ownership of British and Japanese history has on occasion come with orientalist tropes levied in making arguments about an endemic Japaneseness at the level of his style or form. Ishiguro’s signature narrative distance, for example, has been read as analogous to East Asian traditions of landscape painting that accentuate the insignificance of human action. Ishiguro himself has augmented, complicated, and evacuated such readings with his numerous digressions on the role of Japan in his fiction, including insisting that Japan, as he remembered it, could only exist in a book: “Japan didn’t exist anywhere, apart from in my head. It might have a vague correspondence to the place I’d arrived at off the plane, but I realized that it was my own private Japan. I realized that it was fading. It was disappearing with every year that I got older” (“Kazuo Ishiguro”).

For two of our contributors, returning to the Japan of Ishiguro’s imagination in those early novels allows for a reading of postwar Japan that has largely been underplayed by critics. Jerrine Tan returns to the historical materiality of Japan and its postwar history after a decade of criticism that distanced the Japan of his early novels to a mere abstraction. Tan sees Ishiguro as resisting the universalism for which his latter novels are praised and refusing the “aestheticist, exoticizing, and Orientalist readings” (90) that too often defined earlier criticism

of the Japan novels. The result demands attention from Western readers to a historical past and a non-Western world from which they are often shielded by a tacit Anglocentrism. Tan then argues that by “focusing on the geopolitical and historical specificities of the [Japan novels] surrounding the Second World War and postwar industrial difficulties that Japan faced . . . bring international readers to a forgotten moment in world history” (91). Readers will have to contend with the ethical complexities of considering non-Western empires and their atrocities, even those that the West brutalized. In this way, Tan helps us to understand how the supposedly non-cosmopolitan, non-global early novels “exhorts readers to be attentive to national, political, and historical contexts” (92). Tan argues, “Ishiguro’s Japan novels in fact directly and in deeply historical ways engage with the same ethical conundrums addressed in his later novels.”

In a complementary approach, Jane Hu focuses on how uneven global capital is represented in the generic Asianness of Ishiguro’s novels. The progression from Ishiguro’s Japan novels to the Anglophone/world novels favored by Anglo critics is, to Hu, illusory. Instead, Hu “insists on a less linear story about Ishiguro’s international rise than typically presented within the frameworks of globalization, universalization, and American-Anglo homogenization” (127). The figurations of Japaneseness track from the early novels of the 1980s to the present as a barometer of the cyclical mobility of capital. In this way, Hu writes that Ishiguro’s “Asian Anglophone historical novels open up a new way to think about overlapping cycles of capital: from British hegemony to US hegemony and now a potential Chinese hegemony.” Japan’s economic rise and fall allows for, in Hu’s figuration, a deeper understanding of the ways in which Japan both typified a generic Asianness during its postwar boom, and shifted with the burst-bubble of the economy into a national allegory not dissimilar to the one told about recession-era Britain. By reading the interplay between the Japan novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, and the so-called global novels, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Buried Giant*, Hu examines how Ishiguro is both indebted to the historical novel, and part of the evolution of that genre. She argues that his novels accurately follow the genetic development of the form: “Ishiguro’s oeuvre thus models, in condensed miniature the trajectory of the historical novel since Walter Scott’s germinal *Waverley* (1814)—as a form that has grown more generically fantastical and categorically unrealistic over time” (125). She goes on to show how Ishiguro’s Asian Anglophone historical novels “capture both Japan and Britain in the era of late twentieth-century American empire” (146).

These new methods and theories for taking up Japan and Asian-ness in Ishiguro's work are themselves a demand for rereading—of a misplaced Orientalism, a mistaken dismissal of historical context, and a failure to observe the global workings of capital across the whole of his canon. They are also an invitation to think about Ishiguro's work as an exemplar of contemporary fiction's desire to make space for new ways of confronting the world and its inequities.

We're Never Letting Go of *Never Let Me Go*

Our one fear in putting out a call for contributors to this special issue was that we might solely receive essays responding to *Never Let Me Go*. Thankfully, this was not the case, though they all refer to the novel, in ways large and small. Why, then, is it so hard for us to let go of *Never Let Me Go*? How does a novel with a chilly style, detached narrative affect, characters whose inaction makes you want to run up a wall, and an ending fully without resolution hold such an immovable place within the canon of contemporary literature? The novel has become an industry unto itself, a catalyst to an endless series of critiques and theorizations. While not an answer, per se, it is clear that the novel's openness to theoretical interventions of the contemporary moment avails it to scholars looking to see how novels are in dialogue with the circumstances in which they are produced. A scan of recent academic work on *Never Let Me Go* touches on nearly every major theoretical model or inflection that has thus far characterized work on literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: biopolitics in the spirit of Foucault (in work by Arne De Boever and Roberto del Valle Alcalá), neoliberalism and the failure of the welfare state (in work by Robbins, Kelly Mee Rich, and Whitehead), world literature and internationalism (in work by Walkowitz, Shameem Black, and Tan), affect theory after Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (in work by Lisa Fluet, Eatough, and Emily Horton), animal studies and posthumanism (in work by Black and Nathan Snaza), genre theory and the novel (in work by Karl Shaddox and Chris Holmes), and postcolonialism and critical race theory (in work by Robbie B. H. Goh and Wen Guo), just to name a notable few. *Never Let Me Go*, by way of the criticism that has followed in its wake, appears to be a novel for every season. If, as Neil Lazarus has audaciously claimed, there is in practice only one novelist in the postcolonial canon, Rushdie, we might say *Never Let Me Go* claims a similar position as the ever-persistent novel of the early twenty-first century.

One possible explanation for the novel's continued hold on the critical imagination is that it perfectly represents the contradiction between the mobility and transmissibility of the world literature text. The world outside the Hailsham school for cloned children spins along at 1.5x speed, with technological marvels in 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s Britain that match and surpass those of our twenty-first-century present. While it is clear that the world of the novel progresses at science-fictional speed, the history and features of this world are largely hidden from both the reader and the characters within. With the exception of the problematic film adaptation, which invents a system of biometric surveillance of the clones, the novel does not care to share the secrets of its world of outsized progress for the privileged. As if to accentuate this point, the students themselves subsist on a diet of anachronistic and dated culture-junk delivered to them as the refuse of a world that moves on ever rapidly without them. (Or, more precisely, which moves along with them only in pieces.)

Although they are for all practical purposes raised for the slaughter, the children of Hailsham school are treated to something akin to a classical education with a heavy emphasis on art and literature as means to bettering one's character. Indeed, they spend their time reading and rereading the same classics. The cruel comedy of these humanistic efforts is that the students' teachers (save one in particular) and headmistress believe them to be without souls in the first place. The clones seek solace in a false dream of a deferral based on the atavistic notion that true love holds a tangible shape and feel to it, that it might wrap around them, keep them whole, and protect them from the eventual unwinding that shadows every moment of their adolescent lives. But as any reader of this extraordinary novel will already know, the lessons of literature and art, of true love and of hope in connection to the parallel world full of possibilities, are all tragic components to the machinery that will chew them up before they have reached adulthood.

Thom Dancer begins his essay, "Being Kathy H.: Relatability in *Never Let Me Go*," with an anecdote recalling how in a graduate course, *Never Let Me Go* consumed the early conversations between the students, eclipsing the other novels on the syllabus. In a dexterous feat of counterintuitive work, Dancer comes to the heart of *Never Let Me Go*'s hold on us by addressing the question of the novel's relatability, not as a static rationale for its popular appeal, but as an aesthetic and ethical category that propels the most difficult question the novel poses: what are the consequences for failing to relate to the clone children of Hailsham? As Dancer presents it, it is precisely

“because of his preference for first person narration, we never find an authoritative narrative presence that guides readers toward the correct ethical or political choice” (156), that our perceived relation to Kathy and the clones comes with such high stakes. Dancer argues that relatability, the much maligned anthesis to criticism, operates in the novel as a complex system of attraction and repulsion, loyalty and critique. “For Ishiguro,” Dancer writes, “engaging with relatability matters, because it demands a reading that can acknowledge its own ethical and political implications without seeking atonement from them” (155). These ethical implications require the reader to withhold externalized judgement and to make the empathetic leap to see the world through Kathy’s eyes: “how many of us can understand the foreshortened and fragile world that Kathy occupies? But this is what the novel demands in this moment” (167).

Adam Parkes likewise raises the question of relatability but carries its ethical questions to the archives, where he looks to Ishiguro’s collected papers for answers as to why we may or may not attach to certain difficult or unlikeable characters. In “Ishiguro’s ‘<Strange> Rubbish’: Style and Sympathy in *Never Let Me Go*,” Parkes takes up the question of our attachment to, or detachment from Kathy H. as a stylistic and rhetorical matter of so-called uninteresting characters that can be parsed in Ishiguro’s archive of drafts and edits. Parkes sees the archive, held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, as allowing “us to reconsider these emotional, ethical, and aesthetic issues in light of Ishiguro’s compositional practice and, in particular, to revisit the questions of language raised by some of the novel’s most influential early readers” (175). Reading *Never Let Me Go* via the archive invites an intertextual approach between various early incomplete, and later “neat” (178) drafts of the novel, whereby we see Ishiguro making word by word decisions as to how Kathy will come into being as a creature made of increasingly lively and vernacular language. By way of his work in the archive, Parkes uncovers an editorial frame of reference for one of the most perplexing and meaningful questions about Kathy’s narration style: “What is the context in which Kathy H. is writing? Or, is she speaking, the words on the page representing a silent author’s transcription of her spoken voice?” (qtd. in Parkes 180). Indeed, he finds Ishiguro in the “First Rough Draft” asking, “Is she [she] writing, or is she telling? Or thinking?” Our encounter with the detached affect and “dull” (174) style of Kathy’s narration, for Parkes, presents the reader with an ethical quandary: “If we find it hard to stay with Kathy, if we find her language and storytelling style not merely plain but dull, dull even to

the point of wanting to put the book down, are we not encountering the limits of our sympathy as readers and perhaps as human beings?” Parkes challenges us to answer the question of “whether the lack of interest is the result of authorial choice or of an intentional artistic strategy . . . or of a failure of sympathy or insight on” the reader’s part (175).

Rachel Cusk offers her own theory for the novel’s profound impact. She suggests that the necessary reader for the novel is one with a double-vision, or more precisely, two readers capable of seeing and unseeing, knowing and not-knowing:

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.

Her call for a rereading speaks to what is tacit in this collection of essays on Ishiguro: a great writer creates his own readers, while preparing space for the reader that he cannot yet imagine. As we take up and take on the writer that Ishiguro has become since the awarding of the Nobel Prize, we hope to plant a marker of sorts in the timeline of his evolution as an artist of and for his moment. Now is the time to ask new questions of his fiction, and to return to our strongest and most lasting critical engagements with his work and to see all that they were blind to.

We end our introduction on a playful note. For while all introductions anticipate the work to come, this one must also anticipate Ishiguro’s immediately forthcoming work, *Klara and the Sun*, promised to hit bookshelves in March 2021. Sadly, for us the timing meant we were unable to read *Klara* for this special issue. We did, however, invite our contributors (and ourselves) to conjecture about this newest installation in Ishiguro’s oeuvre, using the spirit of rereading to speculate, a bit perversely, about a novel they’d never read. Visitors to the minimalist website for *Klara and the Sun* will find many recognizable elements of the Ishiguro novel in the thinly sketched notes on the plot. Per the website copy:

This is the story of Klara, an Artificial Friend with outstanding observational qualities, who, from her place in the store, watches carefully the behaviour of those who come in to browse, and of those who pass in the street outside. She remains hopeful a customer will soon choose her, but when the possibility emerges that her circumstances

may change for ever, Klara is warned not to invest too much in the promises of humans.

Many of our contributors were taken by Ishiguro's turn to Artificial Intelligence, which continues his interest in play with the tropes and conventions of genre fiction. Battersby's expectation is that "the novel will fuse *Never Let Me Go's* incisive probing of what it means to be human, which is so much more philosophically challenging than Kathy's artless narration might at first suggest, with the kind of marshalling of the tropes and resources of genre fiction to explore Ishiguro's characteristic concern with selfhood and memory that we saw in *The Buried Giant*." He looks forward to seeing "how obtrusive or otherwise the science fiction tropes of the novel will be, given that *Never Let Me Go* wears its dystopian thematics so lightly."

Though Tan is also intrigued by the genre valences of *Klara*, she begins her speculation by reiterating the coherence of Ishiguro's oeuvre, noting that *Klara* might be another iteration of the Ishiguro novel. And yet, Tan also expresses a hope that Ishiguro will speak more directly to our contemporary moment: "Given the very exciting new critical work on race, technology, and artificial intelligence, I am curious to see if and how *Klara* will take up or complicate these issues more explicitly." Parkes also wagers that *Klara* will be "an overtly metafictional departure from [Ishiguro's] usual practice," taking up the "point of view of a character who seems to move seamlessly between virtual/nonhuman reality and a more familiarly lifelike reality." But like Tan, Parkes concludes with a wish that "Ishiguro pushes in directions that defy all prophecies and expectations," suggesting our hunger for Ishiguro to somehow write beyond himself. In this spirit, Dancer proposes Klara might transcend the familiar Ishiguro protagonist through her powers of observation. Though the typical Ishiguro character is often limited in their vision, he is curious to know if this will be the case with Klara, "Whether it follows the typical path of giving us a limited figure whose inability to fully understand the human gives us precisely the view we need to see ourselves anew, or if we will get an insightful observer." The question, then, is what will this Artificial Friend be able to observe about humanity, or about herself?

Perhaps this will play out through what Eatough characterizes as Ishiguro's "fixation" on memory. The crucial question for Eatough, then, is how this will work: "Will 'Klara' record events in a different manner than the humans she observes?" Or in the vein of *The Buried Giant*, "Could Klara perhaps operate as a device for reckoning with the differences between how memory is encoded by individual persons and in a particular time and place, and how memory is encoded over

the *longue duree*?” Hu, too, wonders about the historical resonances of *Klara*, noting that while the plot makes it difficult to know whether it will be historical fiction or not, “if it is to join his other historical fictions, “it will likely be something akin to *Never Let Me Go*, given the resonances between Kathy H. and the sentient AI protagonist of this new book.” And “I’m excited,” Hu writes, “for how *Klara* will fit into my questions about ‘generic Asians’—and especially generic Asians as ‘surplus bodies’ (given that here the robot is seeking a home).”

As for us, we think that Klara’s existence, frozen in place in a world that is uniquely limited in its vantage and possibilities, seems sure to follow the existential model described by Plato’s allegory of the cave, where one’s sense of the world outside the cave is limited to the shadows cast by the flickers of a fire lit just outside the entrance. We recognize in Klara’s desire for a companion or friend beyond the walls of her showroom, Kathy H.’s desperate longing for a human possible outside the gates of Hailsham. Shadowing Klara and her inevitable servitude to a human with privileges beyond her understanding is Stevens, alone in his bedsit awaiting the sound of the butler’s bell and his master’s insinuations. We can, with some confidence, imagine that Klara’s inability to know and understand the larger structures of power that shape and constrict her existence will, as is so often the case for the Ishiguro protagonist, result in tragic misunderstandings.

This potential for tragedy is compounded by *Klara and the Sun*’s tagline, promising a “stunning new novel that asks, ‘what does it mean to love?’” (“Klara and the Sun”). This question has been an increasing preoccupation in Ishiguro’s fiction, overtly thematized in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Buried Giant*. In both cases, love provides a way to extend one’s lifetime—whether as a temporary respite from organ donation, or as a shadowy island afterlife—though this promise never quite succeeds, whether cruelly refused or left narratively open. We will have to see if *Klara* follows this pattern set in place by Ishiguro’s recent genre fiction. One hopes, though, that love might take on other resonances in this new work of his, suggested by Klara’s status as an artificial friend. For while the previous novels have narrowly defined love as between a long-term, romantic, heterosexual couple (Kathy and Tommy, Axl and Beatrice), the most compelling, complex relationships in Ishiguro’s fiction are often friendships: an attachment that shades into other relations including rival and double, mentor and employer, colleague and peer, neighbor and alum. Here is where Ishiguro most fully exists, and where, we wager, *Klara* might as well.

These projections are by nature preposterous. Yet in a serious way, they are also another form of critical rereading, produced by

our manifold readings and understandings of Ishiguro's previous works. By conjuring these counterfactual *Klaras*—and by inviting you to consider them—we exist for a brief moment in each other's orbit, a community drawn together by returning to Ishiguro.

Notes

1. The complex entanglement of reading and identity formation is the focus of Spacks's autobiographical *On Rereading*, which proceeds from the belief that "rereading brings us more sharply in contact with how we—like the books we reread—have both changed and remained the same. Books help to constitute our identity. They also, as we reread them, measure identity's changes with the passage of time" (9).
2. See the by now infamous *Guardian* interview, in which Ishiguro shares his hyper-awareness of his own translatability: "'I want my words to survive translation,' he says. 'I know when I write a book now I will have to go and spend three days being intensely interrogated by journalists in Denmark or wherever. That fact, I believe, informs the way I write—with those Danish journalists leaning over my shoulder'" ("For Me, England Is a Mythical Place").

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