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Nostalgia isn't what it used to be: the collected works of Haruki Murakami

I try to avoid collecting physical books. I normally read at least a hundred books per year, so to avoid accumulating more than my bookcases can hold, I try to read e-books and to maintain a quick turnover by borrowing books from friends and libraries and returning, selling, or giving away as many read books as possible. But a few collections of books are spared the constant turnover, either because of their rarity, their sentimental value, or because of frequent re-readings. My collection of Haruki Murakami novels and short stories is of the latter two categories.

The first Murakami novel I read was a Swedish translation of *Norwegian Woods*. I was a high school student in Sweden and preparing for a year as an exchange student in Kanazawa, Japan. Haruki Murakami had been on a list provided by the exchange program of recommended authors and books for understanding Japanese culture. Murakami was in between Yukio Mishima and Kenzaburō Ōe: I am just grateful I wasn't discouraged enough to stop after Mishima.

Norwegian Woods is narrated by Toru Watanabe, who looks back on his years as an introverted, solitary college student in the 60s. Watanabe's reminiscences are provoked by a tacky instrumental version of The Beatles song *Norwegian Woods* that he hears on an airplane years later. *Norwegian Woods* is throughout a story of nostalgia, ranging from the details of everyday life that despite their triviality evoke sorrow and wistfulness when they belong to a time that has passed, to grief for the loss of a loved one.

Watanabe's introspective nature and perceived alienation are common to many of Murakami's protagonists. Murakami himself comes across in a similar manner in *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, although he meticulously avoids talking about any personal details unrelated to running. However, Murakami and his protagonists are all very much likeable (both by the reader and by other characters), despite their preference for solitude and their introversion. Also, particularly in his later works, they are increasingly happy and contented despite their chronic nostalgia and feelings of alienation (whether this applies to Murakami himself is hard to say). Tengo of the 2010 novel *1Q84* is a high school math teacher and writer with few close ties except to his editor and the married woman he sees once a week. Tengo's personality is similar to that of his 1987 counterpart Toru Watanabe, but he

doesn't experience the piercing sorrow and oppressive nostalgia that Watanabe does, and would probably consider himself decently happy. In a world of extroverts, Murakami and his protagonists are a reminder that introversion is not a character flaw.

I never intended to collect Murakami's books. I simply wanted to read them all, or wanted to read them again in a different language, and couldn't bear to give them up afterwards. I re-read *Norwegian Woods* in English at the end of high school just before moving to the United States, and re-read it again in its original Japanese during college while preparing to study abroad in Japan. Refreshing my Japanese was my justification, but really, I just wanted an excuse to read it again and to buy a new edition of it. I was surprised at how little difference the language made—I would have barely noticed whether the story was in English or Swedish or Japanese, with the exception of some cute details, like how Watanabe's obsessive-compulsively neat and orderly roommate is nicknamed “突撃隊” (“Totsugekitai”) and “Stormtruppen” (both translating to “The Storm Troop”) in the Japanese and Swedish versions, respectively, and renamed “Kamikaze” in the English translation.

I think the lack of difference between the translations (aside from attesting the skill of the translators) emphasizes the universality of the feelings described and evoked by Murakami's works. Anyone who has ever looked at something fairly trivial and thought that it was so beautiful that it hurts, or who has ever felt nostalgic for a thing, a person, a place, an experience, even while it is still present or occurring, or who has felt suffocated by the accumulated weight of memories, can identify with Watanabe or Tengo or any other of Murakami's protagonists.

Of course, you could argue that these feelings really are a typically “Japanese” feature—any student of Japanese culture or art will at some point have heard the expression “mono no aware,” often translated as “the sadness of things,” which is an apt description for much of Murakami's work. But similarly fitting words are found in other languages. My native Swedish has “vemod,” which likewise describes a bittersweet sadness or melancholia, especially in relation to things that have passed (or that will be passed); there is “nostalgia,” of course, which is of Greek origin but has been loaned into many

Western languages; and in Portuguese, “saudade” describes sorrow and nostalgia, or the sorrow of nostalgia.

Ironically, my collection of Murakami books has itself start evoking feelings of nostalgia—both the stories and the physical books in themselves. The English translation of *Kafka on the Shore* that I read in one day, curled up under a down blanket in my mom’s apartment in Stockholm, reminds me of my mother and her home-made bread and the many daily cups of strong Swedish coffee that keeps one warm during wintertime. On the other hand, I will have a hard time rereading my British Vintage editions of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, because they remind me of the first time I felt homesick for the US. I read them while spending a few months in Sweden during a particularly harsh winter, waiting to go study abroad in Japan again. This was mid-college and the first time since moving to the United States that I was away from there long enough to experience yet another species of homesickness.

That year, my time was roughly equally divided between Sweden, United States, and Japan, and that was the year that I realized that I am going to be homesick for the rest of my life, because no matter where I am, I will always be missing at least two other places. Later that year, in Kyoto, re-reading *Norwegian Wood* (this time in the form of two cheap Japanese paperbacks) made me feel a little better about my comical degree of homesickness.

One of my Murakami books that makes me smile when I see it is the Swedish hardcover edition of part one of *IQ84*, which my mom gave me via my dad who was visiting me in St. Louis. I wasn’t expecting to read it until the English translation came out almost half a year later. Seeing the large hardcover tower over all the tiny Murakami paperbacks in my bookcase now makes me think of my mom, who knew how happy I would be to read it early, and my dad, who uncomplainingly lugged it and a pile of other Swedish books, coffee, and candy for me through however many airports between Stockholm and St. Louis.

I wouldn’t sell, gift, or lend (except to very trusted borrowers) any of my Murakami novels or short stories. Most of my Murakami books are themselves objects of nostalgia, from the particular edition

and language to the coffee stains and dog-ears. Besides, I re-read them often enough that it wouldn't be convenient not to own them... but that is just an excuse, really; my collection of Murakami novels are my security blanket, assuring me that it's okay to be an introvert in a world of extroverts, and that nostalgia can be a positive emotion.

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