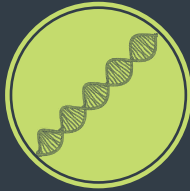


THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO KAZUO ISHIGURO'S



NEVER LET
ME GO

“Connell Guides open up the world of literature
and make it more accessible and exciting.
I recommend them thoroughly.”

ROBERT HARRIS

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by David Isaacs

*The
Connell Short Guide
to
Kazuo Ishiguro's*

Never Let Me Go

*by
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Introduction

Never Let Me Go (2005) has attracted superlative after superlative. “A clear frontrunner to be the year’s most extraordinary novel,” began Peter Kemp’s review in *The Sunday Times*. In 2010, the popular American magazine *Time* called it “the best novel of the decade”. More recently, in 2015, James Wood – one of the most influential critics of his generation – has labelled it “a miraculous novel”. It has sold more than a million copies worldwide and has been translated into over 40 languages.

But no-one seems to know quite what to make of it. Even its biggest admirers emphasise how strange it is. The writer Geoff Dyer, in a review for *The Independent*, calls it a “very weird book”. Theo Tait agrees, writing in *The Daily Telegraph*: “*Never Let Me Go* is a very strange novel.” Tait continues: “[It] is not exactly an enjoyable experience. There is no aesthetic thrill to be had... except that of a writer getting the desired dreary effect exactly right.” Similarly, James Wood, despite thinking the novel “miraculous”, seems puzzled by its banality, describing its prose as “excruciatingly ordinary” and stressing its “dizzying dullness [and] punitive blandness”. “So bland is this voice,” he writes, “so banal its daily discourses, that the reader has a kind of amazed admiration for Ishiguro’s freakish courage.” In his review of Ishiguro’s most recent novel, *The Buried Giant*, Wood is still mystified:

“*Never Let Me Go* contained passages that appeared to have been entered into a competition called The Ten Most Boring Fictional Scenes.”

So why, if it's so strange and perhaps even so boring, is *Never Let Me Go* so admired? It may well have something to do with how unexpectedly moving readers, reviewers and critics have consistently found the book. Wood writes of its “great and speculative emotional power”. The Singaporean critic Wai-chew Sim puts it well, if academically, when he describes an unaccountable “existential distress” that the novel “generates” in its readers. Similarly, the critic Sarah Kerr describes “a mounting existential distress that hangs around long after we read it”. Perhaps the novelist M. John Harrison captures best the strange and deep feeling the novel leaves you with, in his review for *The Guardian*:

readers may find themselves full of an energy they don't understand and aren't quite sure how to deploy. *Never Let Me Go* makes you want to have sex, take drugs, run a marathon, dance – anything to convince yourself that you're more alive, more determined, more conscious, more dangerous than any of these characters.

A summary of the plot

Kathy H. introduces herself. Enigmatically, she tells us that she's spent the last 12 years as a “carer”, looking after “donors” before they “complete”. Now that her time as a carer has come to an end, she says, she wants to go over some of her memories.

In Part One, Kathy recalls her childhood in an idyllic English boarding school called Hailsham. Her memories are muddled and vague but certain things become clear. There is something unusual about this school. It has a strong emphasis on creativity: students are encouraged to create works of art, the best examples of which are taken away by a mysterious figure they call “Madame” (who sometimes hangs around the school but never speaks to them) for display in her “gallery”, whose purpose is unclear. They have regular “Exchanges”, where they exchange artworks and poems, and less regular “Sales”, when boxes of second-hand junk are delivered to the school and the children excitedly shop for their favourite objects. They have weekly health checks, over-specific sex education lessons, and it is constantly drilled into them that it is far worse for them to smoke than it is for other teenagers. They have neither surnames nor parents. They know very little of the outside world; they know they're “special”.

Most of the narration deals with Kathy's

friendship with Ruth – a bossy girl – and with Tommy – a boy with “a bad temper but a big heart” (251). Through Kathy’s detailing of seemingly insignificant events, it becomes clear that she is in love with Tommy and feels inferior to Ruth. One of the longest episodes involves a cassette Kathy buys at a Sale: an old jazz album called *Songs After Dark* by Judy Bridgewater, which becomes a prized possession. Kathy is particularly taken with a song on the tape called “Never Let Me Go”. She is dancing alone to it in her dorm room one day, when she becomes aware of “Madame” standing in the doorway, watching her, with tears streaming down her face. Madame walks away without saying a word; shortly afterwards, the tape disappears. Withdrawn from the outside world, the students at Hailsham have developed their own mythology, according to which Norfolk is a place in which lost things are found: the young Kathy hopes that one day she will visit Norfolk and find the tape. Ruth, meanwhile – who is now Tommy’s girlfriend – buys Kathy a different tape to make up for the loss. Though she’s jealous of their relationship, it’s an act of kindness that touches Kathy.

As they grow older, the children learn more about who they are: they are clones, they discover, brought into the world to incubate spare organs for “normals” – ordinary citizens. When they leave school, they will become “donors”: their organs will be harvested. After four “donations”, they will

“complete”: they will die. Thanks to them, sickness has become a thing of the past.

In Part Two, Kathy remembers the time immediately after they leave Hailsham. She, Tommy and Ruth move to a kind of residential complex they call “the Cottages”, where they spend a year or two trying to lead something approaching normal lives, before becoming “carers” (people who look after “donors”) and, after that, “donors” themselves. They read books, explore their sexualities, go for long walks, bicker.

On a day trip to Norfolk, Tommy, recalling their childhood mythology, half-seriously suggests he and Kathy look for the tape she lost as a girl. Kathy thinks the idea ridiculous but, miraculously, they find it in a charity shop. Tommy buys it: Kathy is deeply moved by the gesture.

Also on this trip, some of their new friends tell them about a rumour they’ve heard: that if two Hailsham students can prove they’re in love, then they will be granted a “deferral”: their lives will be extended by two or three years. This, Tommy thinks, might be why Madame collected their art: to see into their souls in order to tell if a couple seeking a deferral are truly compatible. Tommy and Ruth, who are still together, think about applying for a deferral. Ruth relentlessly and cruelly taunts Kathy about her relationship with Tommy. Kathy, unable to bear it, applies to become a carer early, knowing that it will hasten

her death. She leaves the Cottages and doesn't see the others for ten years.

In Part Three, Kathy turns to more recent memories. Ten years after leaving the Cottages, she's still a carer, but both Tommy and Ruth are donating: Kathy is caring for them. They broke up shortly after Kathy left and haven't seen each other since. They're both nearing "completion" and Ruth suggests that she and Kathy visit Tommy one last time. When they're all together, Ruth tells them that she always knew they were in love and that she deliberately kept them apart out of jealousy. As an act of atonement, she hands them a piece of paper, on which is written Madame's address: she wants them to apply for a deferral.

After Ruth has "completed", Tommy and Kathy find "Madame" and learn that such a thing doesn't exist. "You're by yourselves," Madame tells them (267). Hailsham, she reveals, was an experiment, an attempt to give the clones – who are not popularly regarded as human – a good life before giving up their vital organs. Her gallery was an attempt to communicate their humanity to the population: not to reveal their souls, but "*to prove you had souls at all*" (255). Evidently, the public weren't convinced: Hailsham closed, and clones are now reared in farmyard conditions. Tommy, Kathy and Ruth are the lucky ones.

Tommy and Kathy try to enjoy their last few months together, but it's a struggle: Tommy asks

Kathy to stop being his carer and they part. Kathy has received the call up to become a donor. In just a few months, she will complete.

The Strange

From my summary, it might sound like *Never Let Me Go* is set in some grim, dystopian future. But it isn't. The very first thing the novel tells us is that it's an historical novel: it begins with the words: "England, late 1990s." This is our past, but a recent past, a past that many readers will have a clear memory of. The novel is emphatically grounded in the familiar.* Very quickly, however, we realise that this version of the past is, as the academic John Mullan puts it, "removed from any historical reality that we can recognise". The novel pulls in two directions: its subject matter (human cloning) gestures to our future, its setting to our past, but it's neither. This odd, futuristic history is set "not", as the novelist Margaret Atwood writes, "in

* *Never Let Me Go* is alone amongst Ishiguro's novels in this respect. His first two, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) are both set in post-war Japan; his third, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is set in post-war England; his fourth, *The Unconsoled* (1995), in a surreal landscape in a generic European country; his fifth, *When We Were Orphans* (2000) in early-20th century Shanghai and London; his seventh, *The Buried Giant* (2015), in a mythological Britain of the sixth or seventh century.

Britain-yet-to-come, but in Britain-off-to-the-side”.

It is a Britain in many respects identical to our own (“hideously familiar” is Attwood’s phrase), but with a number of faintly discordant details woven into its fabric.* As Attwood has noticed, for example, Tommy “who is the best boy at football” is “picked on because he’s no good at art... [but i]n a conventional school it would be the other way round”.

Hailsham doesn’t operate like conventional schools; its students don’t operate like us. They have habits and customs that are slightly different to ours, described glancingly, as if they’re nothing out of the ordinary. Kathy remembers, for example, how they used to listen to music:

several people [would] sit on the grass around a single Walkman, passing the headset around... You listened for maybe twenty seconds, took off the headset, passed it on. After a while, provided you kept the same tape going over and over, it was surprising how close it was to having heard all of it by yourself. (100-101)

Kathy only includes this ritual in her narrative to set the scene for an unconnected incident, but its strangeness lingers; it’s not how we listen to music.

* There’s also the fact that in this version of Britain children are generated in labs, reared as cattle and routinely butchered for their vital organs.

Often the discord can be heard, faintly, in Kathy’s language. Here she is, for example, describing how boys would proposition her at the Cottages: “Sometimes it was because he was interested in becoming a couple with you; other times it was just for a one-nighter” (125). Her language here is *slightly* off: where she says “was interested in becoming a couple with you”, we might say “wanted to go out with you”; where she says, “it was just for a one-nighter” we might say, “it was just a one-night stand”. It’s not how we talk.

These details are easy to miss, and not obviously significant in themselves – maybe this is just how Kathy speaks – but their cumulative effect can’t be ignored. We feel that these characters don’t quite see as we see, live as we live. The glitches add up to a world which may resemble ours closely, but which doesn’t feel right.

The writer Louis Menand writes interestingly about this feeling. “Ishiguro does not write like a realist,” he says,

he writes like someone impersonating a realist...
It’s realism from an instruction manual: literal, thorough, determined to leave nothing out. But it has a vaguely unreal effect.

A vaguely unreal effect: what Menand is describing is something which psychoanalysts and cultural theorists have spent much of the last century or so

puzzling over: “the uncanny” (a rough translation of the German word *unheimliche*, which literally means “unhomely”).

In an influential essay, “The Uncanny”, Sigmund Freud describes the uncanny as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar”. More recently, in his book *The Uncanny* (2003), the cultural critic Nicholas Royle identifies the sources of the uncanny as, amongst other things,

a peculiar commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar... It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context. It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home.... The uncanny can be felt in... manifestations of insanity or other forms of what might appear merely mechanical or automatic life... And conversely or likewise, it can be felt in response to dolls and other lifelike or mechanical objects... [It may] be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself as a foreign body...

Unknowingly, Kathy offers her own vivid description of the uncanny when she remembers arriving at the Cottages after leaving Hailsham:

We could see hills in the distance that reminded us of the ones in the distance at Hailsham, but they seemed to us oddly crooked, like when you draw a picture of a friend and it's almost right but not quite, and the face on the sheet gives you the creeps. (116)

This is a good description of the world depicted in *Never Let Me Go*: nearly an exact likeness of ours, but *not quite right*: vaguely unreal. It gives you the creeps.

“In telling a story,” wrote the 19th century German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, in a comment Freud quotes and which seems particularly pertinent to Ishiguro’s novel,

one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty as to whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton* and to do it in such a way that his attention is not focused directly upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately.

In the 1970s, a Japanese robotics professor called Masahiro Mori put forward an idea that echoes Jentsch’s comment and haunts *Never Let Me Go*. Mori observed that the more lifelike and human a robot becomes, the more unfamiliar it feels. A

* An early robot.