Jonathan Ellis and Mitoko Hirabayashi

"In Dreams Begins Responsibility": An Interview with Haruki Murakami

HARUKI MURAKAMI is the most widely discussed Japanese novelist of his generation. Since his first publication in 1979, *Hear the Wind Sing*, for which he was awarded the prestigious *Gunzo* Literature Prize, Murakami has baffled and enchanted readers in equal measure. According to his friend and fellow writer, Kazuo Ishiguro, Murakami has two distinct styles, "the bizarre, anarchic style" and "the very controlled, melancholy approach." As Ishiguro adds, "there's also a thematic obsession going back very far into the past, which is that falling-cherry-blossom thing, about the ephemerality of life."

Murakami followed an unusual apprenticeship to become a writer. He was born in Kyoto in 1949; later the family moved to the busy port town of Kobe. His father was the son of a Buddhist priest who met Murakami's mother while both were teachers of Japanese literature. Murakami rebelled against the cultural traditions his parents represented and instead fell in love with the hardboiled fiction the American sailors left behind in Kobe's secondhand bookstores. His admiration of the work of Raymond Chandler dates from this time. At the age of fourteen, he also became hooked on jazz music after attending a concert by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. Murakami met his wife Yoko Takahashi at Waseda University in Tokyo. He suspended his studies to run a jazz bar with her. They named it Peter Cat after Murakami's favorite

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pet. At the age of twenty-nine, Murakami began to write *Hear the Wind Sing* at the kitchen table after he returned home from work. The realization that he could be a writer famously came to him while watching a baseball game.

In the early 1980s, the success of Murakami's writing encouraged the couple to sell the jazz club. He switched to a regimen of early rising and physical exercise (including marathon running) which continues to this day. At about the same time, he also began a parallel career as a translator of American literature into Japanese. Murakami's life as a relatively anonymous writer with a small but respectable readership changed with the unexpected success of *Norwegian Wood* in 1987, written from self-imposed exile in Europe. Murakami began the novel as an experiment to see if he could write a "straight, simple, rather sentimental story." To his surprise, the novel sold over two million copies in Japan alone. The book touched a nerve, particularly among Japanese teenagers and young adults. They wrote to Murakami in their thousands, paying homage to the Shinjuku nightclub featured in the book and buying CDs compiled from the music mentioned in the story. Murakami was sent into a panic by his transformation from author to public celebrity and remained in Europe waiting for things to calm down.

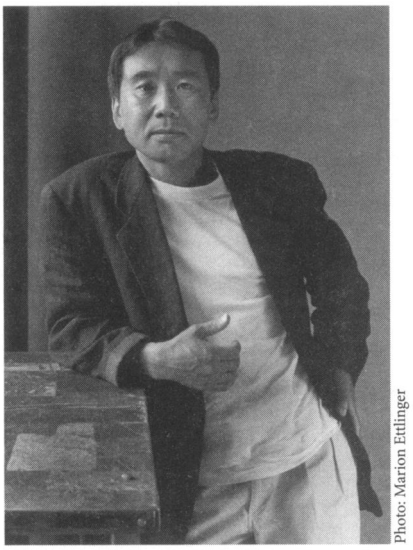

Photo: Marion Ettlinger

Haruki Murakami

Murakami's reclusive lifestyle since the success of *Norwegian Wood* has led many critics to liken him to J. D. Salinger. While Murakami's early narrators sound a little like Salinger's, the personal habits of their authors are in fact quite different. Murakami makes hardly any public appearances in Japan, but is happy to attend book signings and readings elsewhere. While he regularly turns down offers to film his novels, he frequently allows cinema and stage directors to adapt his short stories. His agreement to be interviewed for this journal further undermines the image of Murakami the recluse. He simply finds the attention surrounding celebrity distracting.

In the early 1990s, Murakami took up a series of visiting lectureships in the United States, at the universities of Princeton and Tufts. It was in America that Murakami completed what many people consider to be his masterpiece, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, a Chaucerian novel of interlocking narrators and narratives, each of which unsettles fixed ideas of Japanese history and identity.

In the early weeks of 1995, Japanese society was rocked by two events—the Kobe earthquake in which more than five thousand people died and the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo underground. Murakami felt the need to return home to do something "for my country, for my readers." He began interviewing victims and perpetrators of the sarin gas attack for the book that eventually appeared in English as *Underground*. At the same time, he started work on a series of short stories detailing the consequences of the Kobe earthquake on those who had experienced the disaster from afar. These are collected in the volume *After the Quake*. Both books mark a change in direction in Murakami's fiction from earlier narratives in which a single person can be responsible for the end of the world to his most recent work in which a sense of collective guilt and responsibility lies behind everything. Murakami's new novel, *Kafka on the Shore*, cites W. B. Yeats's comment that "In dreams begins responsibility." This quote in many ways charts the path of Murakami's writing career.

That said, to some extent Murakami has been telling more or less the same story for the past twenty-five years. Like Alfred Hitchcock, with whom he shares a fatal attraction to mysterious women and vertiginous plots, there are certain recognizable images and storylines that characterize "Murakami world." As Christopher Taylor has observed, "Murakami Man is an instantly recognizable character, although his names and biographies naturally come and go. He exists at the edge of Japanese society, and he generally follows a somewhat marginal trade. His wives and girlfriends often walk out on him, so he usually lives alone. He may have a cat, but mysterious forces are quite likely to abduct it." Murakami's characters make sense of these losses by retreating into a hermitlike shell. They pass time drinking beer, listening to jazz records, and taking their shirts to the laundry. Eventually, a teenage girl or older woman provides them with consolation. In the case of the teenage girl, she gives him advice and sympathy; the older woman frequently offers him sexual fulfilment. Along the way, several surreal events will happen, usually involving suicide or murder. In Murakami's best work these digressions will have historical or political significance. Most Murakami stories end with the hero forced to

choose between his past and present life. Most of the time, he remains with the new, more down-to-earth woman he has found, dancing forward into the future. Occasionally he ends on an edge, like James Stewart's character in *Vertigo*, endlessly watching the same woman fall to her death.

This interview was conducted over two days in August 2004, the first part in Murakami's office in Tokyo, the second two hours south of the city in his seaside home in Oiso. During the interview, Murakami frequently spoke of his sense of living "two lives," both physically between city and country and psychologically between different story-telling traditions. His daily life is certainly split in a similar way, constantly moving between the anonymity of Tokyo and the peace and community evident in his house by the sea. While Murakami was courteous and sincere in both locations, he appeared more relaxed away from the city. The humor that is so much a feature of his writing slipped into the conversation more frequently than in Tokyo and he was more willing to reminisce.

Murakami does the majority of his writing in his study at Oiso, surrounded by his large collection of jazz records, a legacy of life as owner of the Peter Cat in the 1970s. The study is accessed by climbing a winding wooden staircase where Murakami seems secure from the goings-on in the rest of the house. If W. B. Yeats were a jazz lover, his tower might look something like this. Downstairs, there are several large paintings, many of which seem to comment directly on Murakami's own fiction. There is a lovely abstract painting of a sheep (a particularly appropriate visual image for the author of *The Wild Sheep Chase*) and also a painting of a teenage girl in a red bikini on a beach. From the dinner table one can watch her sunbathing from a distance, as if from behind sunglasses. There are of course several such moments in Murakami's fiction where teenage girls seen from a distance suddenly enter the lives of the male protagonists. The girl in red seems a beautiful reminder. Murakami must see it every day as he ascends the stairs to write.

Although Murakami is in his early fifties, he still acts like a slightly awkward teenager. His instinct is to remain wary of situations that might compromise or embarrass him. He has several revealing hand gestures. Before answering a question, he often places his palms outstretched in front of him as if surrendering something of importance. At the same time, this gesture is also rather gnomic, like a secret code between friends. Murakami also takes several seconds to begin answering a question. When he is about to begin speaking,

his hands fold in on themselves in a loose knot, his eyes peering down into the bottom of this tangle of fingers and thumbs as though looking inside for the answer. In short, Murakami's body language is both curiously withdrawn *and* inviting. One is never quite sure if he is glad of one's scrutiny of his writing or completely alarmed.

Jonathan Ellis (JE): *I was interested to read that for your dissertation at university you wrote on "The Idea of the Journey in American films." What was your main thesis?*

It was a long time ago, in 1973 or 1974. It's thirty years ago. I don't have an accurate memory about that paper. It was not written to prove something. I just stated what I had in my mind at that time, that the feeling of movement is very characteristic in American culture, especially in movies and novels. Americans are seeking a frontier, or looking for a terra incognita. They keep moving most of the time. In other words, it seems that they are afraid of stasis. I think that is a merit and a weak point of American culture. That is what I felt as a student, and so I wrote it down in three or four days. [Laughs.] And I got an A-plus.

JE: *It must have been very good.*

My professor told me that I could be a writer. I was surprised to hear that because I didn't think I could be a writer. I had very little faith in myself, so I thought that she was joking. So when I found myself writing something when I was twenty-nine years old, I was surprised. I didn't expect to write anything, but the professor was right, I guess. But, you know, it's [the dissertation] just writing, just papers. It doesn't mean a lot to me.

JE: *In 1984, you met Raymond Carver, whose books you've also translated. You've called him "the most valuable teacher" you ever had and "the greatest literary comrade." How did you become friends and what did you learn from him?*

He didn't look like a writer. He looked like an ordinary man. He used to be a factory worker and he used to be a janitor and he used to be a salesman. In any case, he didn't look like an author to me. [Laughs.] I felt I didn't look like an

author at that time either. I used to be one of those ordinary people. I worked so hard through my twenties. I'm from a practical family. After graduating from college and university, I became a blue-collar worker and I worked physically hard for seven or eight years with my wife. They were hard days.

So in the first place I could feel he was the same kind of person as I was. To write something, to create something, it's hard work. We are happier being a writer than just a worker, just a laborer. We appreciated it very much. I could feel the joy of writing from his attitude, from his way of speaking, from everything. He was very humble. He was not very arrogant at all. I felt I could trust him as a writer, as a person. That was a very great thing. He was the first person in whom I could conceive of that feeling.

Of course, his writing, his style, is very impressive to me. I guess I didn't learn things technically from him because our styles are different. His style is basically realistic and mine is not. I'm more surrealistic, but what we are doing is very similar. It isn't easy to explain the similarity and the difference. We are both writing fiction with easy words but we are looking for the deeper story within those easy words, so we are doing the same thing. And he was very sincere and very hard working, so those are the reasons why I felt he was a friend and comrade.

Mitoko Hirabayashi (MH): *You've also spoken frequently of your admiration for the British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, especially his ability to look "beyond the confines of a single culture." What did you mean by this?*

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan and then he went to England and stayed. While he insists that he cannot speak Japanese at all, his wife says he can speak good Japanese. [Laughs.] But I think he doesn't want to speak Japanese anymore, especially in Japan, because his Japanese is not sufficient for him.

I am interested in his cultural background because he is Japanese—a hundred percent. But he chose to stay in England. There are some contradictions in him. I can feel it when I read his books. It's very strange because when he writes about Japan or Japanese society, it is as if a foreigner is describing Japanese culture. But when he writes about British things, like a butler or an aristocrat, it's like he's looking at British society through the eyes of Japanese people. The British characters he writes about look like Japanese people. It's very strange. That is what I'm interested in, those contradictions. Of course he is looking for his own identity as a Japanese writer who lives in England.

My own opinion is that most of us are looking for our own identity. We are holding our own contradictions. His own approach to the world could be generalized. That's what I feel from his books. What he's trying to do is very important for literature. It's a very difficult and serious thing. I admire his attitude and his skill.

JE: *You've recently translated J. D. Salinger's* A Catcher in the Rye. *I was wondering when you first read his work and to what extent you think you're influenced by his writing too?*

I read that book when I was sixteen or seventeen.

JE: *That's when I read it too.*

[Laughs.] I was impressed when I read it. But I wasn't thinking of writing something myself at that time; I just enjoyed reading it. It's kind of strange but I didn't reread the book after that. I put it in the bookshelf and it stayed there all the time. But that book is very important to me. It's great because it's very honest. It has a beautiful style and it has a drive. I was asked to translate it a couple of years ago and I did it. I enjoyed translating it very much. It was fun, just fun. But I don't think I was influenced by the book strongly. Some people think that I was influenced by it, but the fact is I just loved it.

JE: *You spent much of the late eighties and early nineties abroad, first in Europe and later as a visiting scholar in the U.S. Why did you decide to leave Japan at this time, and in what ways did being abroad affect your writing?*

The one reason, the biggest reason, is I didn't have to be here. I am a writer. I could work anywhere in the world. The second reason is I felt that I was not loved by people here. [Chuckles.] I was so different from other writers here. I was a black sheep in the literary world of Japan. Readers loved me and they read my books very eagerly and enthusiastically. But people in the literary world didn't appreciate my work or love me. Some people were attacking me. They said I was destroying the tradition of Japanese literature. That is what I did. [Laughs.] It's constructive destruction. I had faith that I was doing the right thing. But the noises were big, so big, that I just wanted to get out. I wanted to write books in quiet surroundings. That's why I chose Europe in the first place. I had a friend in Rome. She invited us to come so we went to Greece first, then

Rome; I wrote two or three books while I was staying in Europe. So I think it was a good decision to move to Europe. I didn't want to be spoiled by the fame. I was getting famous when I left Japan in 1986 or 1987. Some people thought of me as a cult author and I didn't want to be spoiled by those things. I wanted to be alone and I wanted to look at myself sincerely. I was nobody in Europe. These days my books are translated into several European languages, but not then. I could be anonymous.

MH: *Did you feel comfortable being anonymous, being alone?*

Yes and no. It's not easy to live in a foreign country. People are different. Customs are different. Foods are different. It wasn't easy for us to live in Europe. But I felt I was free at least. That was good, very good. So life in foreign countries fitted me well. But nobody missed us. [Laughs.] And I did not miss anyone. I just missed Japanese food, like tofu or soba. That's all.

MH: *When you started writing, you said of America that you were not interested in it "as entity." What interested you was "America discovered in my temporality . . . seen through a glass window." How did America appear to you through this window? In what ways had it been translated for you?*

In the 1960s, when I was a teenager, it wasn't easy to go abroad. Now it's easy to go to America. It's cheap. But in the 1960s it was just a dream to go to foreign countries. I was looking at American TV shows and I was reading American books. American culture was everywhere around us. But we could not go to America, or any other country. So there was a kind of frustration. But I enjoyed that frustration very much. I thought of it as a fiction. I enjoyed it as a fiction so that was fun to me. And after a while I was not interested in going there. I didn't have to go there because I could see America through the window, my own fictional window. That was great. That was and is my disposition, to fictionalize everything in my own room.

In the 1960s, American culture was so bright and strong. What we wore was Ivy League style—buttoned-down shirts. [Laughs.] What we listened to was American music—the Beach Boys and Elvis Presley. After 1965, the British invasion began and the Beatles and the Rolling Stones came. But before that, all the music was American music, rock and roll. So American culture was strong. I didn't choose it. It was there. I'm from Kobe. It's a port city. There are many foreign sailors around the city. The used bookstore sold paperbacks that

the sailors brought in. They were so cheap. I started to read those paperbacks in English when I was a high school student. I loved it—reading in a foreign language. It was a new world to me.

JE: *Did you see America differently after you had lived there for several years, or were you still seeing it through a window?*

The first places I lived in America were Princeton and Cambridge, Massachusetts. They are fictional worlds. [Chuckles.] They are very special places, very Ivy League. But afterwards, I drove from Boston to Long Beach, California. I saw that it is a very big country. Different parts have their own cultures. They are so different from each other. It's an extreme opinion, but the country of the United States is kind of fictional. So my fictionalization of that country was not so wrong. It might have been the right approach to America.

JE: *According to Salman Rushdie, once a person leaves home, the place he or she leaves rapidly becomes a kind of "imaginary homeland"—a part imaginary, part real place. Is this an experience you can relate to having been away from Japan for several years?*

I found certain contradictions in America after living there for four or five years because I wanted to be independent. In America or in Europe, people are independent from the start. In Japan, that's not the case. I had to think about what I would become after being independent. Being independent is not the purpose in life. That is what I thought, especially in America. There should be some purpose in life as an independent person. That's a new concept in my life. In Japan, as a fiction writer, I was trying to make up my own fictional world. I was in my own world and I was by myself. You could say it is a kind of an escape. I didn't think it was an escape. I thought it was making up my own world *here*, this inner world in an outer world. But in America, I felt it wasn't enough. I felt I had to build up something more positive, more constructive. Then I started to write *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. I think that novel is more positive and more constructive. In other words, I have changed a lot through writing that book. I am looking for a new image of myself, of my life. It's a turning point, I guess. I think it was good to go to America to live. Of course there are good sides and bad sides to America. So I looked at it through my own eyes. But America inspired me to be more positive. You cannot escape from society.

MH: *You returned to Japan in the aftermath of two national tragedies: the earthquake in Kobe that killed over five thousand people and the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo underground. You have approached these events through both fiction and nonfiction, in* After the Quake *and* Underground. *Did you have a particular genre in mind when you began writing these books?*

After those two tragedies—the earthquake and the sarin gas attack—I felt I had to go back to Japan and do something. But I had no concept of what I was going to do. I didn't have any defined genre. I felt that I would be able to find what I should do when I returned to Japan, when I was looking around the country standing on the ground. The first thing I did was *Underground*, but I don't think of it as nonfiction. It's not fiction, but it's not nonfiction either. I want to define it as a collection of narratives. Those interviewees, those victims, they had their own narratives to tell. They were talking about the fact, but it is not the fact, a hundred percent. Those facts are coming through their own experiences. It's a narrative. They had been telling their narratives to many people before I met them. But they felt that they hadn't said enough because very few people had listened to their narratives sincerely. But I did. I listened to their stories very closely, very carefully, very warmly, very kindly. It's very hard. They appreciated my attitude. So they offered me their narratives. Nonfiction admires facts and truth, but mine does not. I admire their narratives. They are lively. They are fresh. They are honest narratives. That is what I wanted to collect. Some critics criticized me for not proving anything or separating fact from fiction. But I just wanted to collect these honest narratives. What they talked about wasn't necessarily the truth, but I didn't care. If they felt that way, that was the truth to me.

JE: *I remember you state at one point in the book that some of the narratives contradict each other but that they are still true as memories, true as experiences.*

Yes. If some parts of their narratives were misinformation, it doesn't matter. Totalization of the information would make up the broad truth. I was impressed by their way of speaking; I was moved. That was quite a new experience for me, just to listen to other people's narratives. I changed a lot after that experience. I spent one whole year listening to their stories. It was tough work too. But I learned a lot. Then I started to write a collection of short stories regarding the earthquake. I set myself three rules before I started to write. The first was that the stories should be written in the third person. That was my first attempt at

writing in the third person. The second was that the stories should be about the earthquake in Kobe, but without describing the earthquake directly. The third thing was that the stories shouldn't happen in or around Kobe. In other words, I was trying to write a story about the earthquake but not the earthquake itself. Not the people who suffered in the earthquake. It's a kind of challenge. I enjoyed those rules. I think it was good. What I wanted to describe was the aftermath, not the earthquake itself. What I wanted to write about was how people suffered from a distance. The suffering should be general, not only in Kobe, but also in this country and in the world. People feel that this ground is not solid. It can be turned upside down at any moment. When that book was translated and published in America, it was just after 9/11. I had many letters from American readers. You could feel the suffering from that "earthquake." The situation is the same. No ground is solid. That's a mutual feeling.

JE: *So the earthquake becomes a metaphor then?*

Yes, that's right. In 1995, people in Japan didn't have faith in the safety of Japanese society, economically and socially. The earthquake was just a symbol of those insecurities. The sarin gas attack too. So that sense of insecurity continues to apply, I guess. People say those ten years are a lost decade to Japan. I have the same feeling. This was a lost decade. Just like the experience of people in the 1930s in America. But we have to seek after a new value or principle of living. I think that is what I have been trying to do over the last ten years as a fiction writer.

JE: *In* Underground, *you speak of the danger of defining individuals as "good" or "evil." In your fiction, your description of violent acts is similarly ambiguous. We are not sure how to judge the characters, or whether the violence is justified or not. How would you define evil?*

It is difficult to define—what is evil? I don't think I can explain what is evil, but I can explain what is dangerous. Those two things might be similar in some places. When I am writing a story, I go down to the dark places, to the deep places, like the bottom of a well or a basement. It's dark and it's damp and it's sometimes dangerous. You cannot tell what is in that darkness. But I have to enter that darkness because that is what I feel when I am writing fiction. I find good things and bad things and dangerous things sometimes, and I describe them. Evil figures in my books, like Boris in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. They

are what I saw when I entered the darkness. I can feel it. I can feel their breath. I am scared sometimes. I am trying to describe those things honestly. I don't know what it means, but I can feel them.

In *Underground*, of course Asahara, the cult leader, is an evil figure. He's pure evil. I can say that. He destroyed many people for . . . I don't know what. He's evil or has an evil mind. I don't know. What he was trying to do was destroy this system, this society. He was weird and twisted. He had a darkness, a big void within himself. I could feel while I was writing that book that this guy is evil, pure evil. That was so scary. After publishing *Underground*, I was trying to find what is this evilness. Asahara is a very exceptional character. He's mad, of course. But we might have our own insanity, or madness, those kinds of indecent things, in ourselves. I felt I had to find those things in my own darkness. That is what I have been trying to do after that book.

Writing fiction is just a dream. You just experience the procedure of the dream. You cannot change the story line. You have to do what you have to do just to experience the dream, totally freely. We fiction writers can do that awake. We don't have to sleep when we want to see the dream. We can continue intentionally to see those dreams as long as we want. When I concentrate on writing, I can dream as long as I want. I can continue dreaming the next day and the next day, intentionally. That is a great experience, but dangerous sometimes because we are descending deeper and deeper, darker and darker. So if you are not trained, it's dangerous. If you are not strong physically and mentally, it could be dangerous. I think that is what I am doing, more or less. If you had a nightmare, you would cry and wake up. But we have to endure. We have to keep on experiencing the evil nightmare. In fact, I cannot change the story because the story is independent. What I have to do is to follow that dream, that story, as it is going on, advancing. So as I follow those story lines I don't know where I am going to go in that darkness.

MH: *In* Underground, *you state that "what we need . . . are words coming from another direction, new words for a new narrative. Another narrative to purify this narrative." What types of old and new narratives were you thinking of when you made these remarks?*

What I stated in that book is that the Aum gas attack is a kind of conflict between their narratives and our narratives. Their narratives are cult narratives. They have their own strong-minded narrative and it's very persuasive. It

attracts many intelligent young people to their cult. They believe in the kingdom of the beautiful soul. They attacked this ordinary, conventional world. They think of it as a corrupted system and believe they have to destroy that system. That's why they attacked the subway—to make a disturbance. They did it because they believed in their narrative. They think that this narrative is right, definitively, absolutely, and the other world's narrative is wrong and corrupted and should be destroyed.

Sometimes, we who live in this conventional, chaotic world wonder whether our narrative might be wrong, might be corrupted. But this is all that we have. It's just like democracy, or it's just like the marriage institution. They are not perfect, of course. But that's what we have in our hands. It's tested. I just wanted to know what kind of narratives we have in our hands. That's what I was trying to do by collecting those actual, real narratives. They are not beautiful stories, but they are real things. And I collected them in the book, *Underground*.

After I wrote *Underground*, I met cult people and talked with them. They are very talkative and they speak very fluently. They are clever and intelligent people, more interesting than real world people. But I forgot almost everything of their stories. They are very shallow and superficial. When the strong wind comes, they are all gone. But the stories of the real world people stay. They have their own substance; they have their own weight, and they stay. They are not so smart or so clever. Their stories are sometimes boring but they stay. I noticed that after I did sixty-something interviews. They stay in my mind, in my heart, in my soul. They stay right now. What I learned from that experience is that if a story is strong it stays, even if it's awkward, even if it's not smart.

JE: *Your imaginative obsession with underground holes, passages, and wells seems to make literal Franz Kafka's comment on the need for novels to provide an ax to the frozen heart within. Psychoanalysts would probably link it to the unconscious. Why do you think you keep coming back to these images in your writing?*

I think I've answered that question. Literally, I like going down to that dark hole where I write fiction. Those images are very haunting. They don't leave me. Descending. There are so many good things in darkness. Some people say that it is Jungian. But I haven't read much of his work. I am not interested in that

kind of psychoanalytical thing. It would be a distraction. I am a fiction writer. I trust my own instinct, not the theory. That is why I don't read Jung's books much. Some people say there is a similarity between my fiction and his work. It might be true. But I have reached this situation through my own world, not Carl Jung's world.

When I start to write fiction, I have no time or plot or anything. I have some scene or some fragment or some conversation or some ending. I sit at my desk and start to write fiction. I do not know what kind of story I will write at all. I just follow the story in my mind. I trust my unconsciousness, my unconscious world. Trust is everything, trusting the world. To be spontaneous is very important to me when I am writing—to be free and to be spontaneous. You could say it's a kind of therapy for me, writing. I'm going down into the depths of my own mind to find many things. I'm not healed, you know. It's not a healing. It's just finding myself more deeply, more honestly. Your dreams don't betray you. It just comes from the inside. Fiction is the same thing. It comes from my own inner world. Readers can share that world. That's a great thing, I think. And they are paying money to share it. [Laughs.] That's great.

JE: *In your work self-elimination is viewed as a positive experience. In* Hard-Boiled Wonderland, *for example, the main character chooses to stay in the End of the World rather than follow his shadow back into the "real" world. In* A Wild Sheep Chase, *characters are literally possessed by another creature and are forced to reassess their previous lives. Do you see your writing as celebrating the possibilities of annihilating the self over the safety of staying still, or preserving one's previous existence?*

When I wrote *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, I had no idea how to finish it. There are four choices. The shadow stays and the protagonist goes. The protagonist stays and the shadow goes. Both of them stay. Both of them go. I couldn't choose at all. When I reached the final chapter, I was totally at a loss how to end the story. I tried three versions and after all, I cannot remember why I took the present conclusion. So it could have been different. [Laughs.] I chose that conclusion storywise. I felt that conclusion was the most natural at the time. But if I were to rewrite that book at this moment, maybe I would choose a different conclusion. I don't know. It's not a final conclusion. It could be different. Nothing is conclusive. It's changeable. I always feel that everything is changeable in my fiction.

Regarding annihilation, I guess I have been changing. When I was younger, I think I had a tendency to go somewhere else, leaving this real world. As a fiction writer, I could find a very quiet, sacred place in myself. I could escape from this realistic, chaotic world. That was my dream. But I have changed since then. I am getting more positive, and the stories I write have been changing a lot these past twenty years. I wrote *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* in 1985 or 1986, close to twenty years ago. I wrote *The Wild Sheep Chase* in 1983, more than twenty years ago. So I have changed. But in America, my books have been published out of chronology. So it's confusing. Readers cannot follow my progress, my career. *The Wild Sheep Chase* and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* are books I wrote when I was in my early and mid-thirties. It's quite a long time ago. I don't know why but when I was in my early thirties I just wanted to go somewhere else. I was just curious about what kind of world I had in myself. But now, I think that was dangerous sometimes. It's not the place to escape. I have to build up some positive things in it. That's the difference, I guess. I think I have matured as a fiction writer.

I was just curious. What kind of world do I have in my mind? I was just like a little boy finding a big barn. What is in this barn? There are so many new and strange things in this barn. I was just a curious kid. [Laughs.] You know that feeling?

MH: *You often use katakana rather than Chinese script for characters' names. Your characters are called "Johnnie Walker," "Kakfa," or "Man Friday." At times these names suggest a certain degree of anonymity while at other moments they evoke a number of images and meanings in readers. What do you intend by using those names?*

In the early years of my career, I just *hated* to put names on my characters. It's too conventional, I felt. If I use the name, say, "Murakami Haruki," for one of my characters, *mura* means "village," *kami* means "upper." *Haru* means "spring," *ki* means "tree." Each word has its own image as a Chinese character. I wanted to avoid those characterizations. If I put the name in katakana, it's more anonymous, as you say. It's a kind of symbol. It's a sign. It's just the same thing Franz Kafka did in *The Trial* with K. If the name of the character is K., it could be anybody. It could be *you*. It could be *me*. That is a symbolized message. But if I put the name K. or M. or F. today, it's too much like Kafka. It *is* Kafka, so I can't do that. I didn't want to do that. So I use katakana names for my characters, mostly.

In *Norwegian Wood*, for example, the name of the protagonist's friend is Kizuki. It's kind of a strange name in katakana. But my Chinese translator asked me one day, "What is the character of *this* Kizuki?" I had no idea. [Laughs.] So I said, "You can put Kizuki in any Chinese character you like!" But I had no idea what kind of character to put for Kizuki. I don't know; I still don't know . . . [Laughs.]

JE: *What about characters, then, with associations, like "Johnnie Walker" or "Colonel Sanders"?*

It's just an icon, you know. The character is my icon. I just wanted to use it as satire.

MH: *"Haruki Murakami" is almost a brand name in Japan. There are numerous books explaining your work to readers, many of which are almost as popular as the books they set out to explain. What do you think of the Murakami industry?*

I don't understand why those books come out. The fact that my books are different from other Japanese writers may be one reason. Since it is difficult to read my novels in the way other novels are read, perhaps some readers read those books in order to look for clues. My novels are not realistic in certain places, so many people want to know what they mean. I am not interested in what is meant or symbolized by them; I would like people to read my work for the story first. But there are many people who feel differently, and like to buy such explanatory material.

MH: *Do you feel uncomfortable, then, that your name is used in this way to make money for other people?*

Since I don't read those books myself, I don't understand what they're about. I have communicated before with readers on the Internet. My readers like to read my novels frequently, at least three or four times. They reread them several times to try and find out what the novels mean. I am very pleased with those readers, but I don't welcome those who depend on manuals to explain fiction.

I certainly don't appreciate the way in which "Haruki Murakami" is used as a brand name. However, there is an eternal relation between writers and critics. Honestly speaking, writers don't need critics, though it may sound

arrogant. Of course writers need readers and readers need critics. So there is some correlation among the three.

I am not particularly conscious of being popular or famous, although it might sound strange. I take the subway, shop, walk around, come home, and eat dinner. I lead an ordinary life. I am conscious of being a writer only when writing at a desk, but not on other occasions. If Haruki Murakami is used as a brand name, it functions as an independent thing, separate from myself. I don't have anything to do with it and try to distance myself from it intentionally.

JE: *Jay Rubin recently celebrated the contribution your wife, Yoko, makes to your writing. According to Rubin, Yoko is your first and most important reader. What type of reader is she?*

Usually, I write nine or ten revisions of each book. I pass the draft to Yoko at the third or fourth revision and she reads it and she tells me her opinion. And we discuss it for a couple of days. Then I start to rewrite again. When I have rewritten it, I pass it to her again and she tells me her opinion again. This happens three or four times. It is a very tough job, especially if it's a big book like *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* or something like that. But she likes to read my books. She's very candid.

We are husband and wife and we have lived together for more than thirty years and we know each other very well. She has a very strong critical mind. I'm very lucky about that. She's fair. She's my wife and she's on my side of course but as a reader, she's neutral and independent. That is what I mean by fair. She cannot create. She's not that type. But as a critic, she's first rate. Sometimes, she's very hard. Sometimes, I feel very unpleasant or uncomfortable. When she tells me her opinions, most of them are critical. She advises me to rewrite, sometimes a very big part of the book. Sometimes, I agree. Other times, I don't agree. Sometimes we quarrel . . . or discuss . . . or dispute. And sometimes this takes all night. Usually I go to bed early but sometimes we will be up for five or six hours at night, till dawn. I do that because that is a very important and critical thing to do. I am very lucky because she's my first reader and she's my editor.

I have had some good editors in my life, but they come and they go because they belong to the company, to the publishing house. Sometimes, I don't know which side they are on, on my side or on the company's side. Especially in Japan. The publishing house is a very strong company. It's a system.

They belong to *that* system. At the same time, she or he is my editor. Things are kind of complicated sometimes. But Yoko is my wife and she's on my side. She stays, for better or worse. [Laughs.] She's a stable point. She's always there.

MH: *For many years, you responded personally to readers' questions through an Internet site. What was the most interesting query you ever received?*

I had my own home page for three or four months at a time because there were so many replies and three or four months was the limit. I had to spare so much time to maintain that website. When I opened it, I looked at it very eagerly and enthusiastically. If I got 6,000 mails, I'd send a reply to 1,500. It's tough work.

The most interesting questions are usually from teenagers or twenty-something boys or girls. When they find out I am their father's or mother's age, they are so surprised. They ask me, "Why do you know what I feel? My father and mother don't understand what I am thinking. But you seem to know what I am feeling. It is very strange." At the same time, their father and mother are reading my books. In one family, they are passing the books between parents and children. I think that's good. I am very glad to hear that. Sometimes, they discuss my books together. They want to know why their children or their parents like that book.

MH: *Many people think that the development of new technologies such as e-mail and the Internet challenge the future of literature. Do you agree?*

Yes, but . . . this form, fiction, has more than two thousand years of tradition and experience, so we have always been challenged by something and survived. But sometimes, I feel that the nineteenth century was a better period because they had no TV, no moving pictures, no Internet, no game center, no Walkman. All they could do was go to the opera or read a book. And the longer the better. The opera is three or four hours, whereas with Dostoevski and Dickens you have to spend months to read them. I miss those periods. But anyway, we have to survive *this* period, whether we like it or not. Some authors complain that people don't read books anymore, as before. But I don't complain. This is the period we are living in. We have to survive. I think a certain percentage of people read books even if we have strong competitors.

My book *Norwegian Wood* sold two million copies. But my core readership is usually between 200,000 and 300,000. They will read my books very enthusiastically, very seriously. Others, one million or so, they are just float-

ing readers. They don't read books usually. But if there is a bestseller, they are interested in what kind of book it is so they buy that book and read it and don't return. But 200,000 to 300,000 people read my books always. I respect that figure very much. I trust in them . . . and I can live on that of course. [Chuckles.]

We have to compete with other media and it's possible for writers to survive and to live. In Japan, many of my readers read my books on the train when they are commuting. While commuting it's prohibited to talk on the cell phone. You cannot listen to music on a Walkman because it's noisy. And you cannot see TV on the train. So, it's books! The book is a very primitive, very simple medium . . . but because of its simplicity it has possibility. The best answer is the commuting train. I found that when I was interviewing the people from the sarin gas attack—those people are commuters—sometimes it takes two hours one way. That adds up to four hours a day. You can read books four hours a day. That guy is quite a reader. So, I think, yes, we can survive.

JE: *You have complained in the past about the way in which some critics have described your work as not particularly Japanese. Do you think there is such a thing as a national style of writing?*

[Long pause.] I write my books in Japanese of course. And mostly I write about Japanese people living in Japan. So naturally I think I am a Japanese author who is writing Japanese novels. That's very natural to me. If somebody criticizes me for not being so Japanese, I don't have any idea . . . because it is very natural to me.

I don't eat rice too much because I've lived in foreign countries for many years. I can live without rice or sushi. Even when I live in Japan, sometimes I forget to eat rice for a week and I forget to eat sushi for a couple of weeks. I don't notice. But some people think this is strange. If you are Japanese, you have to eat rice once a day, they say. But it is my liberty to eat rice or not. It's *my* life. I think it's the same kind of thing. I don't listen to enka, Misora Hibari, or music like that. I don't listen to that music because I don't like it. And some people criticize me. You don't listen to Misora Hibari. You are not Japanese. But I don't mind because I prefer Schubert. That's my life.

JE: *The evocation of memory in your work is often linked to the act of listening to music—most famously in* Norwegian Wood, *but also in* South of the Border,

West of the Sun *and in* Kafka on the Shore. *Are there some sensations music evokes that literature cannot?*

Oh, yes, music helped me a lot. In my twenties I was running a jazz club and listening to jazz music from morning to midnight every day, seven days a week. The music soaked my mind and my body, every place of my body. It stayed. When I decided to write something when I was twenty-nine years old, I didn't know how to write it because I had no experience at all. I was not a good reader of Japanese literature so I didn't know how to write fiction. At one point, I thought I should write the book as if I was playing good music. What good music requires is good rhythm, good harmony, good melody line. Three things. Writing is the same—rhythm, harmony, and melody. Once I realized that, it got easier for me to write. I wrote that book, *Hear the Wind Sing*, just like I was playing an instrument. I think, even now, two good points of my writing are my sense of rhythm and sense of humor.

For example, I like driving to Elvin Jones. When you look at his playing very carefully, his cymbal is just an anchor always making the same rhythm, very stable, very solid. The other two arms are going crazy—he's doing wild things—but the cymbal remains the same. That is what I want to do. You could say I was influenced very strongly by music. Many artists write fiction. Many musicians write fiction. But I think musicians are better fiction writers than artists because artists are very narcissistic. [Laughs.] Musicians keep on going, always. They are too busy to be narcissistic.