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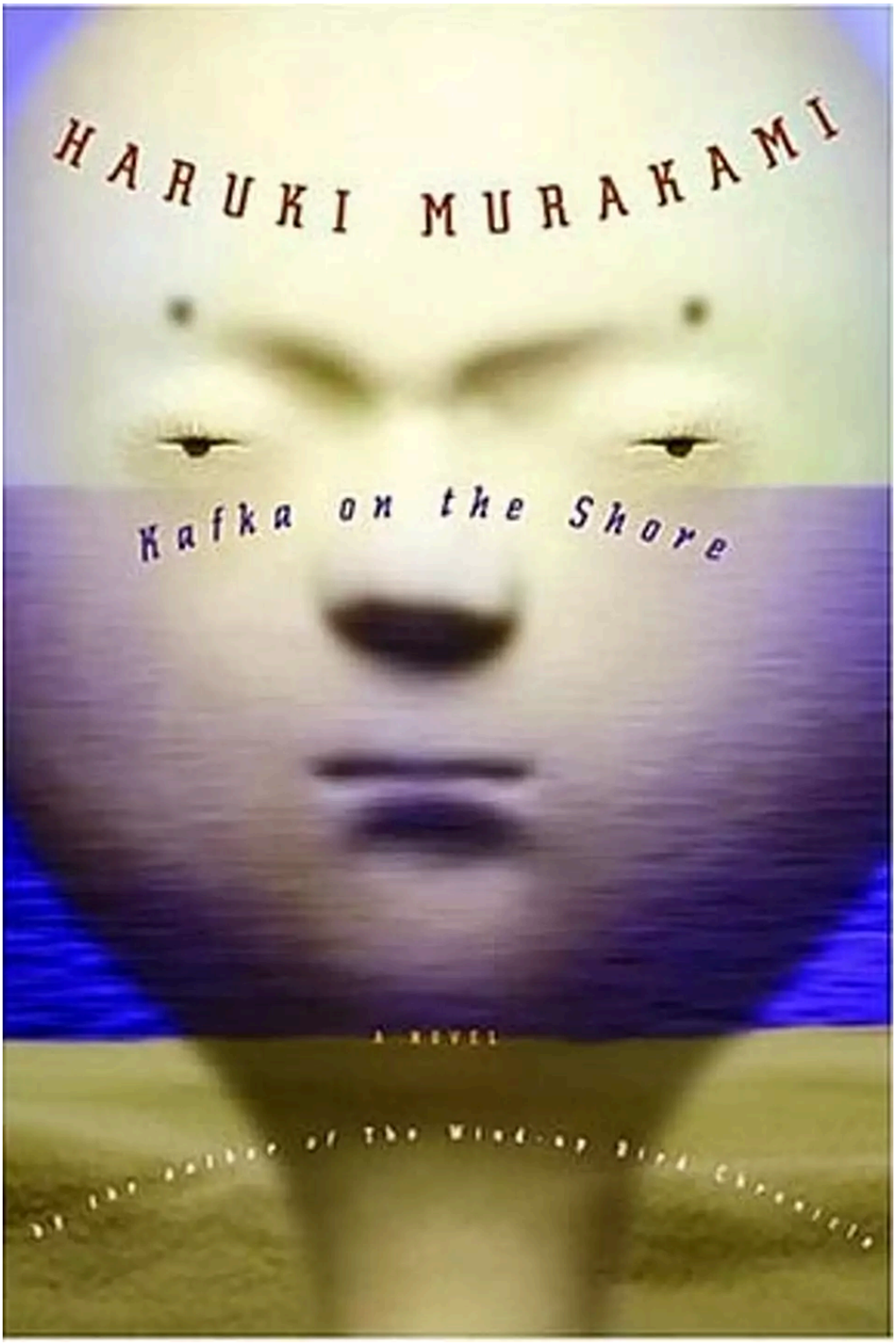
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Convergence of separate odysseys / A questing boy and an old man spark Murakami's ambitious novel

By **Reviewed by Gideon Lewis-Kraus**
Feb 6, 2005

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Book cover art for, Kafka on The Shore."

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Kafka on the Shore

By Haruki Murakami;

translated by Philip Gabriel

KNOPF; 436 PAGES; $25.95

Haruki Murakami is the most widely read and admired Japanese writer of his generation in the West. What's become his almost fanatical audience outside of Japan first emerged in the late '80s and early '90s with the translations of wildly idiosyncratic yet compulsively -- often addictively - - readable books like "A Wild Sheep Chase" and "Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World," in which an engaging yet aloof narrator is plunged into an unpredictable narrative that's half detective story, half crackpot conspiracy theory, half existential critique of modern tedium and half meditation on the labyrinthine intricacies of the unconscious mind; there tend to be more halve to any Murakami story than one knows what to do with.

His renown skyrocketed with the 1997 translation of "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle," which took the basic structure of the earlier books and added a deeply compelling historical dimension. Toru Okada, the narrator, is a droll, spaghetti-boiling everyman who's just quit a dead-end job. With his cat's disappearance and subsequently his wife's, he is drawn into a netherworld of psychic sisters, a menacing bureaucrat and the bottom of a dry well that appears to be some variety of a thaumaturgic portal.

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Since then, several more of Murakami's books have been translated: "Underground," a nonfiction oral history of the 1995 sarin-gas attacks on the Tokyo subways; two small novels, "Sputnik Sweetheart" and "South of the Border, West of the Sun"; the long-awaited Western debut of "Norwegian Wood," the melancholy love story that sold 2 million copies upon its Japanese release in 1987 and made Murakami a celebrity; and a masterful collection of short stories called "After the Quake," all of which are set in February 1995, the month between the January earthquake that devastated Murakami's hometown of Kobe and the March subway attacks, the twin catastrophes that dovetailed with the crash of Japan's postwar economic miracle.

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Boiled Wonderland" and the emotional sensitivity of "Norwegian Wood." It thus presents itself as the most ambitious and lucid account thus far of Murakami's wide-ranging and deftly entwined thematic concerns.

The book opens on the eve of the 15th birthday of Kafka Tamura -- surname real, first name a pseudonym -- as he prepares to run away from home. He's escaping his abusive father, a famous sculptor, and is vaguely searching for his mother and sister, who abandoned him as a 4-year-old. His father once pronounced the Oedipal prophecy that Kafka would kill his father and sleep with both his mother and sister. Unlike the original Oedipus, however, Kafka never appears to be fleeing this curse. Kafka's alter ego, Crow, warns him at the outset that his journey will not be easy. Crow insists that the projections of the unconscious, the palpably unreal amidst the ghostly real, can be just as painful as knives: He will have to make it through a

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Kafka flees west to the island of Shikoku, where he's drawn to a small private library established by a landed family of literary patrons. He blacks out one night and awakens, covered in someone else's blood, in a thicket near a shrine. With no one else to turn to, he seeks the aid of Oshima, the library's assistant director. Oshima is a biological female who identifies as a homosexual male and plays the book's sage Tiresias role, though the library's main attraction is its alluring and inscrutable director, Miss Saeki, a beautiful, middle-aged riddle of a woman right out of Murakami's central casting.

Miss Saeki, who may or may not be Kafka's mother, is little more than an emotional husk. Her childhood soul mate was accidentally murdered at the hands of student radicals in late-'60s Tokyo, and she has never recovered. "Kafka on the Shore," Kafka discovers, is the title of a song she wrote for her boyfriend before he died. In a book bursting with skillfully overdetermined symbolism -- designed, with astonishing success, to evoke the vivid and rich associations of the unconscious -- the title "Kafka on the Shore" also refers to a painting of her boyfriend as a 15-year-old.

It is around this painting that Miss Saeki's character fractures: A ghost of her 15-year-old self begins to visit Kafka's room in the middle of the night to gaze at its idyllic seashore scene. While Kafka is trying to figure out whether the real -- or, if "real" doesn't have much currency in Murakami's world, at least the older -- Miss Saeki is his mother, he swoons over her young ghost.

Like "Hard-Boiled Wonderland," which is told in two alternating narratives, Murakami interweaves Kafka's meanderings with the story of Satoru Nakata, a savant-like man

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cats. These scenes are among the funniest and most memorably inventive in all of Murakami's work: In one, an erudite opera-quoting Siamese named Mimi bats an incoherent, brain- damaged stray repeatedly in the face to help Nakata understand his advice.

One of these cat-finding missions leads Nakata to the home of a fancifully ominous man who introduces himself as Johnnie Walker and asks Nakata to kill him. He shows Nakata a refrigerator full of cat heads, and then eviscerates a series of anaesthetized cats -- eating their still-beating hearts -- until Nakata, quite literally outside himself with rage, stabs him. After attempting to turn himself in, and after prophesying a rainstorm of mackerel and tuna, Nakata hitchhikes westward. He meets a truck driver named Hoshino, who's reminded by Nakata of his dead grandfather and agrees to help him along on his uncertain quest. Their travels, unsurprisingly, take them to Shikoku, where the two storylines converge.

Murakami's novels tend to fall into two camps: the antic tragicomedy and the coming-of-age-inflected tender love story. In some sense, then, "Kafka on the Shore" is the book that Murakami fans have been waiting for: It takes a gentle bildungsroman -- a novel of education -- about the quest for love and autonomy and places it in the context of an otherworldly picaresque choreographed by unseen movers. This amalgam emphasizes one of the major themes common to both strains of Murakami's work: how individuals and societies grapple with both the promises and dangers of radical transformations. Miss Saeki tells Kafka about a book she once wrote, a collection of interviews with people who have been struck by lightning. It's an apt analogy for what Murakami himself does: He writes books about

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center of a vast conspiracy but, despite the atmosphere of unremitting preposterousness, maintains an admirably wry equanimity. It's no wonder these books have been so popular in America, where Murakami is most often compared to Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon.

There are superficial resemblances, but this uninspired critical shorthand scuffs what makes Murakami so dazzling. Though there's a dark humor in their novels, the tentacled conspiracies of these so-called American postmodernists are designed, very effectively, to make us uneasy. Murakami's conspiracies often stem from the same premises -- the hollowness of the consumerist circus, the dislocations of atomized modern life -- but Murakami's narrators seem bemused rather than genuinely threatened.

His conspiracies are thus mysteriously captivating rather than mysteriously suffocating. With their curious characters and labyrinthine undercurrents, they suggest that Japan's unique temper has been preserved despite the postwar transformations that Americanized it overnight. Though Murakami is careful to avoid facile parallelisms, his narrators remain similarly unruffled as their personal lightning storms subside.

In the process, the landscape of American-style consumerism looks reassuringly less like a barren postapocalyptic wasteland than it does a change of background scenery. These themes play well with American readers, who perhaps see in them two welcome consolations: that a McDonald's on every foreign corner doesn't necessarily mean global deracination; and that it's possible for an imperialist

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through the sort of love that promises more than it can deliver. In "Norwegian Wood," young Toru Watanabe sees redemption in the diaphanous purity of his afflicted lover, Naoko; in "South of the Border, West of the Sun, " Hajime projects into his long-lost childhood girlfriend the insinuation of a life-renewing flicker. Both eventually learn to abjure the vain temptations of sudden transformations, and rediscover the pleasures of a more grounded life - - Toru in the independent and unabashed Midori and Hajime in his supportive wife.

Though "Kafka on the Shore" features scenes and characters, like Nakata, as marvelous as anything Murakami's written, the book as a whole is problematic: Its predicament is that in trying to be both kinds of Murakami novel, it manages to be neither. It's on one hand the tale of a boy who struggles for and perhaps wins some autonomy and self-assurance; it's on the other the tale of a boy who's all too convincingly self-assured from the book's opening pages. Kafka coolly endures a hallucinatory din -- a murder committed through a Delphic trap door, a forest populated by ageless World War II deserters and a frozen town (right out of "Hard-Boiled Wonderland") populated by memory-less automatons -- and emerges largely unfazed.

If a classical tragedy like the original Oedipus turns on what critic Daniel Mendelsohn has described as "the conflict between the fierce absolutism of youth and the compromises necessary for maturity," the prototypical bildungsroman shows how absolutism wends its way toward compromise. Murakami has an extraordinary gift for conveying just that sense of poised conciliation, both literally and figuratively. The mature self brokers the blending of the "real" world of light, reason, and

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ocean's distant horizon: "It's hard to tell the difference," Kafka reflects, "between sea and sky. Between voyager and sea. Between reality and the workings of the heart."

Murakami sets Kafka up as a fascinating character: He's the son of a man who's all darkness and imagination, to a narcissistically brutal extent, and a woman who's somehow literally gone "beyond the flow of time," a woman who's been so crippled by pain she's become unable to tolerate darkness. Caught between the extremes of all shadow and not enough shadow, Kafka must venture out to achieve the waggish aplomb of Murakami's other narrators.

But he can't ever achieve that balance because he already seems to possess it. Murakami does present scenes of Kafka wallowing in pubescent anxiety, but these often feel strained and unpersuasive. (It's possible that this is an effect of the translation: Kafka was translated by Philip Gabriel, the third of Murakami's translators, whose narrators seem plodding and flat next to Jay Rubin's broodily reflective observers or Alfred Birnbaum's rhythmically impetuous eccentrics.) These scenes are jarring in a story where Kafka is in every other respect a stable character.

Kafka tells Miss Saeki he's seeking "the strength to quietly endure things," but his precocious gravity belies this wish. From his casual independence as a traveler and his physical self-discipline to his ability to choose the modest goal of survival -- itself a sign of a kind of maturity --

and, most of all, his crowning capacity to forgive with sympathy and compassion the mother who abandoned him, it's clear that he has all the composure he might

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where the preservation of equanimity is the point, this stoicism is an odd, original and entrancing thing. In Murakami's distinctive version of a bildungsroman, however, he sets us up to expect something different: the painful acquisition of equanimity rather than its unflappable expression. In trying to merge his two novelistic conceits, Murakami allowed all of the stirring and troublesome merging to go on before Kafka ever had his own chance to become himself.

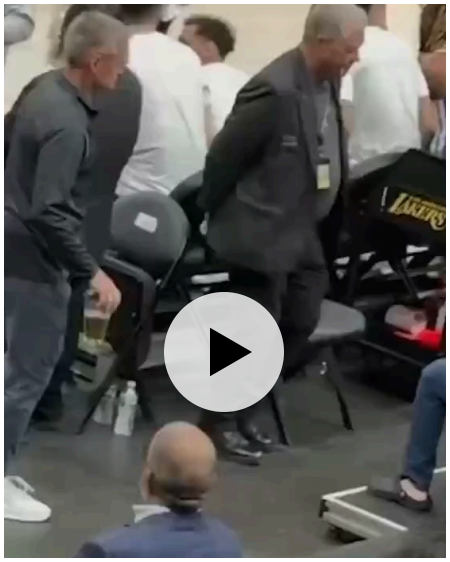
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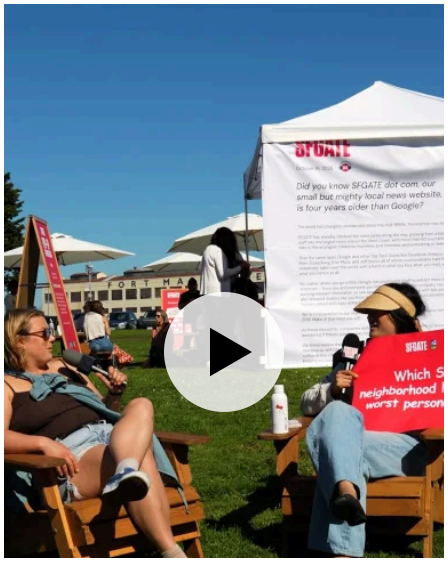
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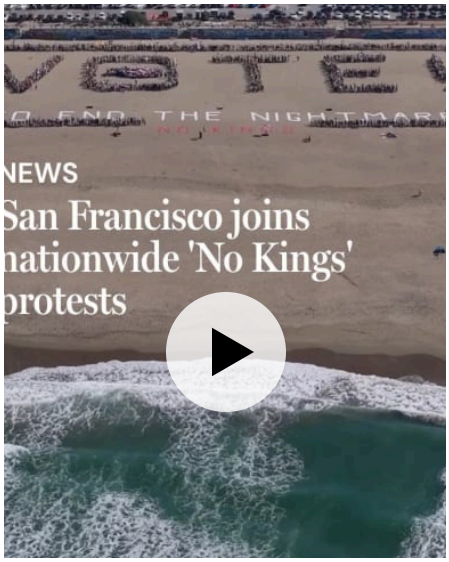
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