



# Never Let Me Go

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## Never Let Me Go Kazuo Ishiguro

From the Booker Prize-winning author of *The Remains of the Day* and *When We Were Orphans*, comes an unforgettable edge-of-your-seat mystery that is at once heartbreakingly tender and morally courageous about what it means to be human.

Hailsham seems like a pleasant English boarding school, far from the influences of the city. Its students are well tended and supported, trained in art and literature, and become just the sort of people the world wants them to be. But, curiously, they are taught nothing of the outside world and are allowed little contact with it.

Within the grounds of Hailsham, Kathy grows from schoolgirl to young woman, but it's only when she and her friends Ruth and Tommy leave the safe grounds of the school (as they always knew they would) that they realize the full truth of what Hailsham is.

*Never Let Me Go* breaks through the boundaries of the literary novel. It is a gripping mystery, a beautiful love story, and also a scathing critique of human arrogance and a moral examination of how we treat the vulnerable and different in our society. In exploring the themes of memory and the impact of the past, Ishiguro takes on the idea of a possible future to create his most moving and powerful book to date.

## Never Let Me Go Details

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Author : Kazuo Ishiguro

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# From Reader Review *Never Let Me Go* for online ebook

## Maxwell says

I'll admit, reading a book that you love for the second time is a scary thing. I read *Never Let Me Go* for the first time 2 and a half years ago, and I loved it. I read it within 24 hours on a vacation, and it whisked me away from that trip I was on, taking me to 1990's England, and into the lives of these children growing up and learning the harsh reality of their world. But it also reminded me of the beauty of friendship, the complicated nature of relationships, the importance of art, and most importantly, the power of words on a written page to instill emotion.

Now, the second time reading this book, I will admit there were some writing techniques that threw me, that I didn't recognize or at least didn't bother me the first time. I also saw some of the characters in totally different lights. Ruth seems like a terrible person, and yet this reading, 2 and a half years later, had me sympathizing with her so much more. Tommy & Kath's relationship didn't move me as much as I remember. But one thing that didn't change about this book for me is how much I love it.

I love the creativity behind it. I love Ishiguro's ability to give away so much by sharing so little. I love the tone this book has, one I will continue to describe as flipping through an old, faded photo album. It's musty and opaque, yet there's a candidness to it that I adore. Ishiguro doesn't shy away from the darker parts of the world. But he is able to approach these subjects from a perspective that offers relatability and insight that is hard to recreate. It's a simple story from the perspective of a simple woman, and still it touches on so much of the complexity of human existence. A book I will return to again and again, and one that keeps me thinking even after finishing it. **5/5 stars**

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## Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

It's very important, if you're intending to read this book, that you don't read any reviews or listen to any talk about it first. I had no idea what this book was about before I read it - and the blurb gives you a very different impression, actually - and so I slipped easily into a story that was as engrossing as it was revealing.

If you know something about what to expect, though, I don't think you'll enjoy it nearly as much. It's a bit like an art installation that requires audience participation: you have to do your bit, too, to make it work, so it makes sense, so it tells the story it was meant to tell. Keep yourself in the dark, that's my advice. Because of this, there's no point in writing an actual review.

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## Lisa says

Originality? Functionality? Individuality? Community? Friendship? Love? Justice?

What is the defining feature of humanity? And who is entitled to that definition? Raising harrowing questions in a dystopian England, "*Never Let Me Go*" seems to be one of those highly divisive books that you either love or hate with a passion.

I loved it, every single word of it, from the beginning to completion.

To complete, a word that implies a special kind of duty and function in the strange alternative post-1945 society described through the eyes of a couple of friends and lovers, - to complete a life, what does it take? Are you a complete human being regardless of how you were conceived? Are you complete even if you share your DNA with somebody else, somebody with higher priorities, and a more privileged position? Are you complete even if your role in society is to serve as a convenient tool for others?

How much of you is shaped by your upbringing, the drilling of a rigid ideology fed to you in an omnipresent, omniscient education system, leaving no options but the ones decided upon by others? Are you complete even if you are moulded carefully to fulfill an external purpose?

When you complete the mission forced upon you, is the sum of your life what you gave to society, or what you secretly stole from it to keep for yourself?

For me, the answer is: you are a complete human being when you manage to see who you are, to reflect on it, and to make emotional and intellectual decisions based on your situation. If you think, see, feel and love, you are a complete human being, no matter what an oppressive, obscene and dehumanising society does to you on a larger scale.

If your thoughts and feelings are yours, and you are able to share them with other human beings, you are complete. In the positive sense of the word. When you complete, you will have lived. Maybe more than the people who fed on your body to add minutes and hours and days and months and years to their own privileged lives.

Never let go of your humanity!

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## Scarlet says

Despair. That's what I felt after reading this book. The kind of despair that suffocates you, that makes you want to break things, or, at the very least, go out for a run so you can let out the agony bubbling inside you.

It's ironic, but *Never Let Me Go* is about three friends who are destined to let go of everything - their bodies, their dreams, their lives and the people they love. And there's NOTHING they can do to avoid that fate.

I hate what this book did to me. I hate the author for creating a semblance of hope, only to completely crush it later.

And that means I hate this book for all the right reasons.

*"I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it's just too much. The current's too strong. They've got to let go, drift apart. That's how it is with us. It's a shame, Kath, because we've loved each other all our lives. But in the end, we can't stay together forever."*

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## Seth T. says

I'm always excited when I run across a novel that is, so far as I can tell, essentially perfect. *Never Let Me Go* is one of those. There is not a single thing wrong with this book. Ishiguro is a master craftsman and it shows here.

The novel's characterizations are pitch perfect. Its narrative flow reveals things in exactly the right order. Mystery is preserved until it no longer matters and then, under the light of revelation, we discover the mystery was never the thing that mattered. Ishiguro plays with the reader as he unfolds his exploration of what it means to live—but never does so unfairly or at the expense of his characters' right to dignity and reality (a right that he very much does grant his characters).

*Never Let Me Go* is narrated from nearly a decade before its publication. As Kathy quietly reminisces from her vantage in the late 1990s, she gradually comes to explore a life fraught with meaning and purpose—and fraught simultaneously with that kind of superlative meaninglessness that Ecclesiastes bemoans in all of its somber weariness. Kathy is a caregiver to recuperating donors and relates her special pleasure in the few instances in which she had been able to offer care to those who had been students at the exclusive (and, as it turns out, much envied) Hailsham, where she herself grew up. Memories of Hailsham water a fertile delta of memories through which we gradually come to understand both Kathy and the world she has inherited—a world filled both with much light and much darkness.

In other words, a world much like mine or yours. Still, Kathy's story is unique and it is in her own tale's peculiarities that our own is better revealed. Better explored.

Some may be tempted to see *Never Let Me Go* as ethical question and admonishment to this generation of readers and to the one that follows us. Certainly, that is there, but only as mise-en-scène to the larger panorama of a woman's quest to discern her past, present, and future from a glut of memories (some of which are only mostly trustworthy or even trusted) and how that journey sheds light on questions more important than mere ethical concerns. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro continues to play as he has in past works with memory and perception and how memory is so often the primary defense against perspicacity, yet as his narrator is acutely aware of her own remodeling of history through nostalgia and forgetfulness, we are assured that perspicuity is not his target here.

No. I believe *Never Let Me Go* is much more a perfectly plotted meditation (and its style is itself quite meditative) on the human condition, the place of our own hands in shaping our destinies, and what it means to live. These could all be clichéd topics but Ishiguro approaches with such a vaguely detached sublimity that he breathes (through Kathy his narrator) a certain verdant spirit into these things. They are never treated as anything more than mundane, but it is precisely by that treatment that he gives his purpose such power and impact.

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## Tatiana says

Let me start by saying that my review might contain some plot spoilers. However I personally don't think that knowing the plot in advance will in any way diminish the enjoyment of this story. The beauty of this book is not in the plot, but in its execution.

Another friendly warning: *Never Let Me Go* is for some reason often classified as science fiction. This is why so many readers end up disappointed I think. This novel is literary fiction at its finest. So if you look down on literary fiction and consider books written by authors like Ian McEwan, Margaret Atwood, and Jose Saramago pretentious, this is not a story for you.

Now to the novel itself. Kathy, now 31, is a former student of an English boarding school Hailsham. Hailsham is a school for kids with special purpose. All education in this school is geared towards conditioning its student to accept their "special" destiny as a given. As Kathy is getting ready to make her first donation while being a carer for other donors, she recounts her life in Hailsham and on her own, mostly in a form of anecdotes about herself and her best friends Ruth and Tommy, their rivalries, jealousies, and affection for each other. There is nothing particularly shocking, gruesome, or intense about Kathy's story, and yet it leaves you with a sense of being a part of a nightmare.

After reading quite a few reviews of the book, I can say that I loved the aspects of it that many abhorred. What other readers say about Kathy - her detachment, her lack of fire and rebellion, about broke my heart. What can be more heartbreaking than witnessing human lives wasted? Let me tell you - witnessing lives taken away from people who do not even realize what is being taken away from them, people who do not understand the value of their existence, people who do not know they have a right for more.

There is of course, much more to the story. The novel explores the futility of human life, its un-bargainable eventual "completion" and how we all choose to deal with the inevitable end. But for me personally the pain of Kathy's quiet resignation to her fate was what stood out and touched me the most.

In many ways *Never Let Me Go* reminded me of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. Only Kathy is a step further from Offred. If Offred knows what horrors she is subjected to, but has no strength or will to change her circumstances, Kathy doesn't even know that her life "purpose," her destiny is inhumane. This work is also, to me, very reminiscent of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. McEwan is a master of subtle build-up to an almost unbearable, life-shattering *moment*, but Ishiguro is a master of subtle telling without telling, foreshadowing, and emphasizing the gravity of the unsaid.

What else can I say about this novel? *Never Let Me Go* is a masterfully written work of fiction which raises questions of what it is to be human, what you choose to do in the face of an impending death and what happens when science is not accompanied by ethics. Subtle, eerie, chilling, and poignant. One of the best books I have read this year.

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## **Bookdragon Sean says**

The thing I enjoy most about Ishiguro's writing is the sheer level of depth he gets into his characters; he captures all the intensity of real emotions whether they are self-serving or destructive. His writing style is simple, plain even, but he builds up many layers within his story telling to unleash the full symphony of conflicted feelings in powerful bursts. However, for all his talent, I don't think this novel was as effective as *The Remains of the Day* or even *When We Were Orphans*.

This is his most popular work, and his most critically acclaimed, and I think that's only because of the particular themes he explores here. This is science-fiction, but I prefer the term pseudo-science fiction. It's slightly futuristic, but the fictional elements are relatively comparable to what man can do today. Vivisection transplant is nothing new. Organ donors are nothing new. This book is oddly similar to the movie "The

Island” (2005) where a select group of people have special clones bred for the singular purpose of providing them with replacement body parts.

What I find interesting is how these two were released so close together. For me, such forms of artifice reflect the worries and concerns of that decade. Discussions over designer babies and animal rights issues (in regards to testing, transplants and cloning) were often in the media. If we look back to the Victorians, the elements in the literature reflected the concerns of the age. This is true for all literary movements; I just used this one for an example, but the point is I think this novel reflects an aspect of the time in which it was written. And for me that’s why I think it’s worthy of study.

But did I enjoy it? Not overly. Do I think it is a success artistically and dramatically? Not really. For me the novel continuously fails to deliver. The retrospective narrative remains detached from the happenings. Granted, the voice has lost all sense of hope and is looking back at a life of sorrow and incompleteness, but it just didn’t have a sense of life. You could say that’s because she is semi-human in the state imposed on her, but, for me, it was too despairing. And that’s coming from someone who counts Edgar Allan Poe amongst his favourite authors.

The inability of the characters to question the situation also somewhat puzzled me. Surely, they must have had some glimpses of thought that considered their present situation an injustice? There was a lack of inquisitiveness into the morality of the situation. And this, when paired with their complete failure of recognising their own feelings about each other, made the narrative feel slightly incomplete. They didn’t seem to look beyond their own situation. As a reader, we make our own judgement calls, but where were theirs?

Overall, I can see why this book is so popular. But I don’t think it’s all that. Ishiguro’s other books are much more accomplished.

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## **Michelle says**

I can see *Never Let Me Go* being great for book clubs because it will generate a lot of discussion.

That being said, I didn't care for the book, for a couple of different reasons. The writing style is very conversational -- very much like you're having a discussion with the protagonist. The thing that annoyed me the most about this was the fact that the things that happened (so bob and I went walking to the store and we had a fight about the tree at school) and then the writer would tell you about the tree and why it was significant, then tell you about the fight. This sort of device is interesting the first few times you see it, but it started to annoy me over time. Maybe because I talk like that, and get off into tangents and anecdotes.

Also, at the heart of the story is the purpose/fate of the main characters. I get the impression that the author wanted to drop clues about it, and then reveal it so that it is a shocking twist (who's Kaiser Soze? ;) The thing is, the references really aren't that subtle, so by the time the twist is revealed, it's not all that exciting. Not only that, but I had so many questions at the end. Like -- these people know their fate, but they never think to question it, and, in fact, seem to be glad for it.

This was supposed to be a coming of age story. Generally "coming of age" involves people growing up and moving forward with their lives; often they need to overcome some obstacle to reveal their potential. However, the characters seem to be stagnate the whole way through; their fate doesn't change. The blurb on

the back of the book mentions that the characters, Kathy, Ruth and Tommy, all have a shared background that's special, and implies that they're lucky. When two of the characters confront someone to see if they can defer their fate (they don't even bother trying to change it), we find out a little bit of what makes their shared background special, but we aren't given anything to compare it to (we're just told that similar people have horrible existences, but not how). And they find out that they can't defer their fate, but they don't really seem to care; they don't even seem to be particularly glad that they tried.

I've seen a couple of reviews compare this book to Aldous Huxley's classic "Brave New World" and Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale". Not even close. In both of these books we're exposed to an alternate reality, and we see how the main characters deal with their situations. Kazuo Ishiguro tries to sneak the alternate reality into the story, to take us by surprise.

I could go on, but I won't. Let's just say that I didn't care for this book and leave it at that.

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## **Trevor says**

It is a pity that people are told this is a science fiction book before they read it. I feel the least interesting thing about it is that it is science fiction. I mean this in much the same way that the least interesting thing one could say about *1984* is that it is science fiction. As a piece of literature I enjoyed it much more than Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and even more than Huxley's *Brave New World*.

The themes that make this book most interesting are to do with the social alienation of groups of people on the basis of inherited genetic characteristics. In fact, as a critique of racism this book is utterly brilliant. Those being racially alienated are genetically identical (they are in fact clones) to those attacking them.

Plato believed those 'in the know' should tell lies to those 'who do not know' so as to protect them from the all too horrible truths about life. I have always hated this aspect of Plato, always finding it grotesque and frightening in its implications. Those implications are drawn out in all their disturbing horror here.

This book has much to say about the nature of 'illness' and how those inflicted with an 'illness' use the scars of that illness as the badges of truly belonging to the group. So that those 'less advanced' in the ravages of the illness don't really know or really belong to the group. As a portrait of victims adopting to being victims it says much about us as humans - thoughtful readers may find it says far too much. I write this on World Aids Day.

Ishiguro writes the most nightmarish novels I've ever read. In others, such as *The Unconsoled* or *When We Were Orphans* the nightmare feeling is due to the dreamlike oddity of the interconnection of events in the story. One reads these books in much the same way that one wakes from a disturbing dream, with feelings of disorientation and anxiety. Even though this is the most literal 'nightmare book' of his I have read - the world he creates being literally a nightmare, and made all the worse by being set in the recent past - it is a book totally lacking in that strange dreamlike quality so characteristic of these other novels. In this sense it seemed less of a nightmare than these others. If you struggled with these, you will not struggle with this in quite the same way.

He also has fascinating and quite painful things to say about the nature of love and how love has a proper time, a time that may be lost or missed. As someone who has loved, lost and missed I found this particularly challenging. The relationship between sex and love and illness is perhaps something people may find simply



too much - not because this is handled in any way that is too explicit, but because I do believe we like to think that sex, as a manifestation of love, has curative and redemptive powers. A book that questions this, questions something we hold very dear and some readers may find this too much to ask.

This is also a book about betrayal. The betrayals we commit against those we love the most and yet that we barely can understand or explain after we have committed them - these are constant throughout the book. He is a writer all too aware of the human condition. The scene which gives the book its title is a wonderful example of the near impossibility of our being understood by others and yet our endless desire for just such an understanding.

There is nothing easy about reading this book - although it is written in the simplest of prose. It has an honesty of feeling that brands one's soul.

I loved this book and have thought about it a lot since I finished reading it and will think about it more. There is much more I would like to say, but there is no space. May we all be good carers before we complete.

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### **Ian "Marvin" Graye says**

Imagine a restaurant, London, mid-2003.

**Publisher:** Hey, K, we need another novel and we need it quick.

**K:** I know, I know.

**Publisher:** Another “Remains of the Day”. Something Hollywood can turn into a hit.

**K:** I’m working on it.

**Publisher:** Any ideas?

**K:** Well, I’ve been reading some Jonathan Swift.

**Publisher:** Who?

**K:** You know, “Gulliver’s Travels”.

**Publisher:** Oh, yeah, Jack Black. It’s in pre-production.

**K:** Well, he had a modest proposal about how to stop the children of the poor being a burden...

**Publisher:** I’m with you, yep, delinquents, sounds good.

**K:** ...he wanted to stop them being a burden to their parents...

**Publisher:** Yep, with you.

**K:** ... and the Country.

**Publisher:** Yep, a Thatcherite angle, I think it's Maggie's time again.

**K:** Anyway, he had this idea that you could kill two birds with one stone...you could end the kids' misery and the poverty of their parents at the same time...

**Publisher:** Let me guess, you could eat them, ha ha.

**K:** You've read it?

**Publisher:** No... wait, you're kidding me, aren't you?

**K:** No, that's the whole point of the story.

**Publisher:** What, eat your kids?

**K:** No, not your own kids, other people's kids.

**Publisher:** How could anyone do it?

**K:** He goes into that... stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled...

**Publisher:** Yuck.

**K:** He even talks about making them into a fricassee or a ragout.

**Publisher:** It's a bit out there, K.

**K:** I was thinking of updating it a bit.

**Publisher:** How would you do that?

**K:** I was thinking I could tell the story from the point of view of a midwife who...

**Publisher:** Someone who has to care for the kids?

**K:** Yeah, until they turn 12 months or something...

**Publisher:** Let me guess, then she hands them over to a child butcher or something?

**K:** Yeah.

**Publisher:** Look, I can see where you're going with this, but it all sounds a bit grotesque.

**K:** That's the whole point. It's an allegory for our times.

**Publisher:** I just don't know whether it's got legs.

**K:** Legs? You're kidding me...it's got every damned limb and organ you can think of.

**Publisher:** I don't want to think of it, I can just imagine the reviews. They'll call it "The Remains of the Meat Tray".

**K:** Ha, I hadn't thought of that, I was going to call it "The Remains of the Creche".

**Publisher:** It gets worse.

**K:** No, honestly, I was thinking of "Never Let Me Grow".

**Publisher:** You mean, like...never let me grow up?

**K:** Yeah.

**Publisher:** Do you think you could turn the people into pigs or something, you know, like "Animal Farm"?

**K:** I was sort of hooked on the idea of using people and narrating the story in a really dead pan voice...

**Publisher:** I don't know about dead pan, it sounds more frying pan to me.

**K:** ...If it's dead pan, people won't be able to tell whether it's set in the future or the present. They won't know how close to reality it is.

**Publisher:** I just don't know what I think about this eating babies stuff.

**K:** But it's like sci-fi, you can do anything in sci-fi.

**Publisher:** Look, if we let you do this, they won't be calling it sci-fi, they'll be calling it sci-fry.

**K:** If you let me do it, I guarantee we'll be able to get Helen Mirren to play the midwife.

**Publisher:** Who?

**K:** Helen Mirren, you know, the Queen.

**Publisher:** No, no. Look, if you can tweak it, you know, think about my idea for a second, set it on Animal Farm, make it about cloning pigs, so they can grow body parts for other pigs or something...

**K:** I know, put some wizard animals in it and call it "Hogparts"?

**Publisher:** Come on take me seriously, K, just clone it up and tone it down.

**K:** I'll think about it.

**Publisher:** I'll see if I can get Keira Knightley to voice one of the pigs.

**K:** She's hot.

**Publisher:** You could call it “Never Let Me Go”.

**K:** What does that mean?

**Publisher:** It’s a song my mother used to play. Jane Monheit sang it.

**K:** I could get used to it. Don’t know what I think about the name Monheit though.

**Publisher:** It does sound a bit German, doesn't it?

**K:** What would you think if I called her something more English in the book.

**Publisher:** Like Judy Bridgewater?

**K:** Who’s Judy Bridgewater?

**Publisher:** It’s my mother’s maiden name.

**K:** Sounds good to me.

**Publisher:** Look, I normally like to respect an artist’s integrity, but hey, you’re the artist, so I guess that makes it OK.

**K:** Do you think I could get to meet Keira Knightley?

**Publisher:** I think so... look I’ve been thinking about it, maybe it’s not such a good idea to turn Keira Knightley into a pig.

**K:** Sometimes you can’t really see the depth of your own characters, until you can imagine who’s going to play them.

**Publisher:** So, no pigs?

**K:** No pigs. I don’t mind the cloning bit though.

Original Review: April 16, 2011

### **Some More Serious Thoughts**

I wrote the above dialogue before I even finished the book.

I wanted to read the book before seeing the film, which I will probably do in the next week or so during the holidays.

When I wrote the dialogue, I probably had about 50 pages to finish, but the dialogue had taken shape in my head, and I didn't want to risk losing it.

There might have been a chance that it would be superseded by my final thoughts on the novel itself.

I had high expectations that I would finally get to appreciate the novel more when I had finished it and absorbed the denouement.

Unfortunately, it left me feeling dissatisfied.

## **Narrative Style**

I didn't find the narrative style appropriate or convincing.

It is told in the first person, by way of recollection of three different periods of Kathy's life.

The periods are discussed chronologically, although during each period, there are occasional allusions to each other period.

There is a lot of internal detail about each period, what was going on in Kathy's head.

Dialogue between the characters is infrequent and sparse.

The novel is overwhelmingly an interior monologue.

Occasionally, there are lapses or flaws in Kathy's memory that she self-consciously draws attention to.

Part of me wanted to say to the author, "It's your story, just get it right, you can remember anything you like, because you're making it up anyway."

But then I guess we have to differentiate between Ishiguro and Kathy.

We have to expect some flaws in the glass, rather than a word and memory perfect narrative.

Still I was never really confident who Kathy was talking to, it wasn't just an interior monologue, there were occasional mentions of a "you", a second person to whom she was talking.

If you had sat down to tell this story to someone else, I think you could or would have told the story far more succinctly and selectively.

The detail and the repetition of environment, atmosphere and mood bulk up the painting, but they don't add to the depth.

Each new layer of paint is superimposed on the previous layer, so that while there might be a lot of paint on the canvas, it is physically, rather than metaphorically, deep.

## **The Geometry of Love**

### **SPOILER ALERT**

While Kathy, Ruth and Tommy live in an horrific environment (perhaps a metaphorical equivalent to a concentration camp), the novel deals with the quality of their humanity under these circumstances.

The guardians might have been trying to work out (incidentally) whether they had souls, but ultimately what we learn is that the positive aspects of human nature can survive or prevail despite the circumstances.

It's interesting that the characters' quest for love initially seemed to be motivated by a belief that it would postpone their donations and prolong their lives.

While this belief turns out to be mistaken, Kathy discovers that love is worth seeking in its own right, regardless of any consequences or notions of cause and effect.

Ruth promoted the belief in the life prolonging effect of love.

In effect, Kathy acquiesced in it and never deliberately interfered in or disrupted the relationship between Ruth and Tommy.

However, when she comes to the end of the story, perhaps she realises that she should have been less acquiescent and let herself express her love for Tommy.

So ultimately, "Never Let Me Go" is a love story, a triangular one at that.

Life is short, you just have to get on with it, you have to take your (true?) love wherever you can find it, even if someone else gets hurt in the process.

When we pair up in love, there is always a chance that someone will miss out or get hurt.

Three into two won't go.

Perhaps, this is actually calculus rather than geometry, but you know what I mean.

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## Fabian says

Ah, f\*\*kin' British writers! My inclination to adore everyone from Evelyn Waugh to Charles Dickens, from Alex Garland to Zadie Smith seems very ingrained deep inside me, primordial, & there must be SOME reason why I find most English fiction so alluring. I think it has mostly to do with mood.

The best book I've read all year (not including Graham Greene's "The Quiet American") is about a micro-society of students in a boarding school hybrid named Hailsham. While there they do rounds and rounds of arts and crafts and come of age together, grow up, & yet there is something so not right with their seclusion and it takes page upon page to discover why it is that they are there. It is horrific, it is bizarre, this secret is handled with so much craft that it is indeed this attribute that marks this outstanding (quite brutal) masterpiece apart from others.

There is an incredibly subtle mastery of several different genres here. Sci-fi meshes impeccably with allegory which is played out in the manner of a Gothic romance. Because the characters are trapped in all of this, the end result is (The Genre Supreme:) Tragedy. I feel so bad for Ruth, Tommy and especially for Kathy, the wise but all-too-frail narrator, but at least their petition, which is the book's title, is true. This one is now on the list of all those I cannot let go or do without.

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## Madeline says

You know those random stock characters in sci-fi/action movies, the ones who never get names or any lines? They're always spending their precious few minutes of screen time getting shoved out of the way as the hero hurtles desperately down a hallway, or watching from a safe distance as a climactic fight goes on, or diving out of the way whenever a murderous cyborg smashes through their office window. Have you ever wondered what those people's lives were like? Have you ever thought to yourself, "Man, this movie's interesting and all, but I want to know more about that guy who owned the hotel where Sarah Connor hid from the Terminator. I bet he leads a fascinating life." (believe me, he doesn't.)

Imagine if someone decided to write a book about this kind of person. The result is *Never Let Me Go*.

(semi-spoilers ahoy, you've been warned) So the book is about a sort of alternate-universe England, where people are cloned and the resulting kids are raised in isolated boarding schools, spending all their time painting and playing sports and getting vague hints about how when they get older they'll have to make "donations." We learn (eventually and with no drama whatsoever) that these kids were created specifically as future organ donors, and that's all they're meant for. Ishiguro introduces us to Kathy, the narrator, and her friends who lived at one of these schools with her - Ruth and Tommy. As I said, we gradually and laboriously learn about the school's real purpose, but it seems almost like a subplot, because the majority of the book is just Kathy nattering on about her school and how she and Ruth got into a fight this one time and also she had a crush on Tommy but he and Ruth were dating so Kathy had sex with some other random guys and *oh my god can we get back to the organ donor thing?* Seriously the whole book is like that - we get the sense that there's some creepy futuristic stuff going on in the background, but our protagonists don't care because they're too busy telling us about that one time Kathy lost her favorite cassette tape and it was very upsetting.

Even when it seems like a plot's about to start, it's always a false alarm. The trip to a nearby town that the three characters take to find a woman they think may be Ruth's "possible" (a person she may have been cloned from) doesn't pan out, and we realize that the real point of the trip was an attempt to convince the reader that Tommy and Kathy have some sort of romantic attraction to each other. Ruth's possible, and everything it might have meant, is abandoned so that Ishiguro can have another chance to demonstrate his astonishing inability to create any kind of chemistry between two characters.

And the end. Without giving anything away, I'll just say that Kathy and Tommy finally get all the answers about their school and what was actually going on, and they respond by...going about their lives in the exact same way as before.

I mean, good God. Even though this is supposed to be some sort of more intellectual science fiction, I don't care. There's cloning and dystopian undertones; ergo it is sci-fi. And I like my sci-fi loud, shiny, and dramatic, with lots of explosions and computers that talk.

There's a reason *Harry Potter* starts when he gets his Hogwarts letter, folks. Because no one wants to hear about ordinary people being ordinary - that's kind of the whole point of *fiction*.

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### **Jim Fonseca says**

I had this book on my TBR shelf for years without realizing that it was essentially dystopian science fiction.

The main character is a woman in her early thirties reflecting back on her life as a child at a private school in England. Kids in the school grew up in an isolated but almost idyllic setting; not knowing their parents but realizing somehow they were “special.” After finishing school they live together in small groups in cottages before heading out into the world on their own. The story is set in the late 1990’s.

From the very first page we learn something is not right just from the language. We read that they have become “carers” and “donors;” their teachers are called “guardians” and later in the story a group goes out to look for an older woman who looks like one the school kids and might be her “possible.” We also learn they can have sex but are incapable of having children and that after their third or fourth “donation” they have “completed.” So we catch on pretty quickly what life has in store for these kids.

There are some genuine mysteries though. Why does the school seem obsessed with encouraging them to do creative work, giving them awards and collecting the best work to go to a gallery that they never see? Where does it go and who sees it and why?

Much of the plot is built around a three-way love story between a boy and two girls at school. All three are good friends but the boy and one of the girls are a couple. That girl is controlling and domineering and prevents the relationship between her boyfriend and the other girl from developing. Late in life a romantic relationship develops between the other girl (the young woman who is our main character) and the now-young man. In fact she becomes his “carer.” Is the love they develop better than it would have been years ago? Or is it too late and stale?

This quote explains the title: “Because maybe, in a way, we didn’t leave it [the school] behind nearly as much as we might once have thought. Because somewhere underneath, a part of us stayed like that: fearful of the world around us, and – no matter how much we despised ourselves for it – unable quite to let each other

go.”

I thought it was a good story; it kept my attention all the way through, although not quite as good as the author's best-known work, *Remains of the Day*.

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## **Esteban del Mal says**

I had previously avoided this book, having heard it referred to as British science fiction. And when I hear "British science fiction," I think of Dr. Who. Then I think about all those childhood snuff film fantasies where Captain Kirk zaps him. (Phasers set to kill, dammit! Inter-dimensional traveling dandies in phone booths are the exception to Federation regulations. What is it about the British, anyway? A phone booth? That's Superman's bag, baby. Superhero envy much? The sun may have never set on the British Empire, but we Yankees have a guy who can fly faster than the speed of light.) But then I found myself alone in a big bookstore in a big city trying to divine what the angelic face on the book's cover was looking askance at (itself manipulated, no doubt, like the fictional clones whose story it was fashioned to sell) and thinking of Kurosawa's definition of art being about the ability to look at humanity in its entirety without flinching.

Mulligan. I flinched.

But Kazuo Ishiguro hasn't. And he doesn't think much of me. Or you. And he's probably correct in that judgment.

Imagine the most genteel, tea-sipping people gathered around fine china in a flowery patterned drawing room somewhere in the English countryside. A shaft of midday sun shines through drawn curtains as they politely discuss the day's happenings. Then imagine Leatherface, Jack the Ripper, Lex Luther, Sarah Palin and Michael Jackson's dad ransacking everything around them, starting at the furthest perimeters of the house, slowly working their way toward our happy people and ultimately cannibalizing them. Then imagine both groups acting as if this is completely normal. Nary a word of protest or questioning, mind you.

That's what this book is like to me.

It was very difficult to read, in the psychological sense of "read." The pathos was too overwhelming. I had to take a break from it, about two-thirds of the way through. I tried to tell myself that it was because I had read the bulk of it as I was hidden away in some claustrophobic hotel room, or that I found the prose tedious at times. In truth, though, it succeeds in shining a light on human nature, and I just couldn't bear to look.

The story made me uncomfortable, and I hated myself for returning to it after having put it aside. I was irked by the characters, my inner-Kirk screaming, "SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING!" The lethargic creepiness made me realize that no, not only was nobody going to do anything, but that neither I, nor you, nor any of us, are all that different from the people who harvest these poor souls for their organs. After all, I'm a fat and happy first-worlder who less and less has a care or thought for all those who are exploited to make my life possible.

We homo sapiens adapt to anything and hang our hats on the most contorted and worn rationalizations.

I would grind my teeth and ask, "Where is their Marx? Their Malcolm X?" Fuck, I'd have settled for Stalin



or Benedict Arnold. But maybe the revolutionary gene had been isolated and bred out of their clone bodies -- a distinct possibility, owing to the imperfect knowledge of the first-person narrator. What's worse is that whereas science may have manipulated them to be docile, we, all of us, have been likewise manipulated by the inertia of history.

As I have written, I grew tired with what I saw as tedious prose, the catalog of details about everyday life cited by the narrator. But then it dawned on me that this cataloging is exactly the sort of thing a dying person would do. Life would take on more urgency. What you and I may take for granted is pregnant with wonder to the condemned. In fact, happy serendipity, this view is supported by a study cited in the November 2009 issue of the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* -- researchers have found that those who profess to be in love are more analytical. And what is someone condemned to die other than someone in love with life?

I winced at Ishiguro's condemnation of liberal half-measures in the face of social norms. The narrator and her group of friends are raised in an almost "humane" manner -- educated, encouraged to cultivate personal friendships with one another, encouraged to pursue art. And while they represent the exception, an experiment to demonstrate that clones have souls, they are condemned nonetheless. All the petty jealousies and transcendent friendships that framed their short, beautiful lives, are consumed by larger society. And while there is never a mention of God, the closest they come is looking up a former instructor who is only mildly repulsed by them and who bids them eat from the Tree of Complete Knowledge.

Repeat after me: I am pathetic. I am powerless.

Kirk, succumbing to the Borg after all.

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## **Juushika says**

As a child, Kathy H. attended Hailsham, an elite boarding school where children were raised to be both healthy and artistic and taught to believe that both their health and creativity were essential to themselves and to the world they would one day enter. Now an adult, Kathy reflects back on her life. She charts the very slow progression of her growth, her friendships with fellow students Tommy and Ruth, and her knowledge, as she herself gradually began to learn about her role in the outside world—and what this role dictates about her identity. A combination of heavy introspection and soft-scifi, *Never Let Me Go* has a thought-provoking premise and is brilliantly written, but fails to reach its potential, spending all its time in excruciatingly slow buildup and none of it in impact, theory, or debate. Enjoyable, but somewhat empty, and so moderately recommended.

This book's greatest strength is its writing style, but it is also one of the most irritating aspects. Kathy, the narrator, is intensely thoughtful and analytical, breaking down her personal history into eras, important moments, and developing themes. She walks the reader through the story of her life much in the way she lived it, slowly, very slowly, bringing to light her final realizations. In other words, there is a lot hidden in this book, and it takes the book's entire length—literally until the last fifteen pages—to reveal it all. In between are circuitous examples, where Kathy starts to talk about one event, goes back a bit to explain why the event was relevant, explains the event itself, and then goes on without having drawn a major conclusion—instead, she's just mapped another point on her gradual arc or argument. The resulting pace is excruciating, both artful, brilliantly thought-out and executed, and simply painful as the reader is lead along, disappointed, and lead along again. The book's pace bring the characters to life (although both Ruth and Tommy lack some dimension) and, with it, the life that they lived, through Hailsham and beyond. As such, it

is the highlight of the book, worked like an artform, but it is also intensely irritating and makes the book (which actually reads quite quickly) seem longer than it is.

There are a near-infinite number of issues, from the ethical to philosophical, that could be brought to question and debate in this book. The very premise almost begs them—both the science of the base culture and the purpose of Hailsham itself. Unfortunately, however, none of these topics are brought to issue in the text. Instead, the book is consumed by the very slow progression of the story, the creep towards the "twist" revelations of who the children are and what purpose they serve. When finally revealed, these revelations are not all that big—not because they lack the potential to be, but because they pale in comparison to the immense buildup that leads to them. The characters just barely exceed the gradual revelation of the book's premise and are largely just passive carriers of the story, and so the other various issues, the possible debates, never enter into the text. So when other reviewers talk about the questions this book raises, what they're really talking about is the potential for questions—and that is not the same thing. The burden of meaning for this book, everything that the reader could take away and continue to think about, rests entirely on the reader, who must pull out the themes and ask the questions himself, carry on the debates himself. The author shirks his responsibility, and the book suffers for it, failing to live up to its potential.

My final complaint with this book is that the underlying concept seems, blandly, unrealistic.

**\*\*SPOILERS\*\*** follow, so be warned: The fact that in the book's contemporary culture the clones are considered non-human despite looking, acting, and living like humans seems entirely impossible. Consider: Humans never viewed the first cloned animals as different than their original counterparts; indeed, we were amazed and drew attention to the fact that they were identical, that they were *clones*. So why would cloned humans be any different (especially that these clones pass in human society as normal and indistinguishable)? Outside of the huge wastefulness of cloning entire humans just to harvest their organs, the fact that the cloned humans were not considered humans seems unreal to me, no matter who the gene donors were, no matter what brief attempts Ishiguro (though Ms. Emily) makes to justify it. **\*\*END SPOILERS\*\*** This is the underlying basis of the book's conflict and plot, and so problems with this concept create problems throughout the book. They weaken the foundations, making it difficult to accept the book and, as a result, even more difficult to take on the work of finding and analyzing themes, which the author fails too do. In the end, *Never Let Me Go* has a thoughtful premise with heavy potential for thought, theory, and debate, and it is skillfully, even artfully written, but the book fails to live up to its potential: the author does not tackle his own themes, and no matter how interesting the premise, it is an unreasonable one. I wanted to enjoy this book, and I did, but I felt cheated at the end: the final product was surprisingly empty, with the burden of meaning placed entirely and unfairly upon the reader alone.

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