Conversations with

Kazuo Ishiguro

Edited by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong

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Introduction

Early in his writing career Kazuo Ishiguro was repeatedly asked by interviewers to relate his Japanese "name and face" to the subjects and concerns of his books. Did the Japanese setting of the first two novels originate in his memory of a distant homeland? How could a person with an Anglo-Japanese heritage such as his write a novel about a butler who was "more English" than even the English could conceive? To each variation of such questions about his identity and nationality in relation to his fiction, Ishiguro responded with what Allan Vorda calls the author's "typical leashed irony."

No, Ishiguro would reply, he does not speak or write Japanese, let alone see himself as working within any Japanese literary or cultural tradition. Indeed, he was advised in 1991 during a visit to Japan to stick to English, lest he should make some offending remark based on his ignorance of Japanese language and culture. He would then explain that while his parents provided him with Japanese textbooks and other artifacts of his homeland, he knew by the time he was a teenager that he would be staying in England for good, and that Japan would remain for him something of an imagined homeland rather than one rooted in any personal experience. "I realized that this Japan that existed in my head, and which was very important to me, was a country that no longer existed in reality, if it ever had," he tells one interviewer.

And no, we learn in these interviews, Ishiguro did not set out to become a novelist, much less one who would intrigue a world of readers with his carefully crafted fictions of human memory, suffering, and endurance. We learn that he initially aspired to become a rock star—that he wrote songs and played some of these on his guitar in the Paris Metro underground station—and that he was a social worker with the homeless before enrolling in a postgraduate program in creative writing at the University of East Anglia; he chose this program because it sounded easier to complete than one in literature. "[I]t looked like less work," he tells Dylan Otto Krider, because "you handed in a piece of

fiction rather than a scholarly thesis at the end of the year." He recalls writing and arduously rewriting short stories in those classes in a "mild panic" and with a dread of being exposed as a writing fraud by his classmates. He tells us that most of what he drafted in those classes eventually became his first published novel, *A Pale View of Hills*; and he recalls the fateful moment he began to rewrite the work's narrative voice in one spoken by an elderly Japanese widow as a major turning point in his nascent literary career. He credits teachers Angela Carter and Malcolm Bradbury for inspiring him in the early years.

In more recent interviews Ishiguro comments frequently on the demands of promoting his novels following their publication. Book tours that span the English-speaking world, requiring hundreds of readings and interviews, eat up months at a time. Some interviewers try to corner Ishiguro into confessing to a parallel between the author's life and those of his repressed characters. Surely the author, like so many of his protagonists, has something to hide. Surely he is at least a bit like Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, here and there avoiding a direct answer to some sensitive question. Or like *The Unconsoled*'s Ryder, who manages his fame through deliberate isolation and purposeful deception (years of book tours and readings surely presented the character of Ryder to Ishiguro's imagination). The author's relationship to his characters and subjects evolved in time, as he explained to Christopher Bigsby: "I do feel I am essentially someone who writes very much about my generation and the world around me, that is to say, the West in the 1970s and 1980s, rather than someone who tries to recreate historical periods. . . . I am drawn to periods in history where moral values in society have undergone a sudden change because a lot of the things I am interested in tend to find a cutting edge in those situations. I am interested in how people who tried to do something good and useful in their lives suddenly find that they have misplaced their efforts." Without indicating whether such concerns have a specific autobiographical reference, Ishiguro nevertheless sheds light on the nature of his writing: "I suppose I write out of a sort of fear of what might happen to me rather than what has happened to me" and "I feel I am a part of that generation for whom making something good out of your life, morally good, was a very conscious thing."

In an amusing moment in which "life imitates art," Peter Oliva catches fifteen minutes with Ishiguro in an elevator, between the author's other pressing engagements, and snatches insights about his craft, in a situation straight out of *The Unconsoled*. Ishiguro notes of this parallel, "[*The Unconsoled*] is supposed to be a metaphor for the way most of us have lives that we blunder

through, pretending we know where we're going but not really knowing where we're going." As with Ryder, fame has indeed caught up with Ishiguro, but at no point in these interviews does it blunt his wit or dull his engaging conversational style. For all of this media attention, Ishiguro is an unfailingly lucid, patient, and polite interview subject.

For those interested in the writer's craft and in the genesis of his fiction, Ishiguro in this volume sheds much light on the process of his writing. He reveals his admiration for Anton Chekhov, whose spare and precise style is an inspiration, as well as for Fyodor Dostoyevsky, whose sprawling but controlled writing—at once "messy and jagged and brilliantly imperfect" — stimulates his more daring literary experiments. Ishiguro observes that the actual writing of his novels represents a comparatively abbreviated period of time, even though he only publishes a novel every five years or so. Much of the rest of the time is taken up with research, with mapping out the narrative, and with auditioning the different voices of his invented characters. Ishiguro likes to know exactly where he is going in his novels before he actually starts drafting; he is in this sense a very deliberate—even fastidious—craftsman. As he tells Graham Swift, "I'm a very cautious writer. . . . I can't do the business of shoving a blank piece of paper in the typewriter and having a brain-storming session to see what comes out. I have to have a very clear map next to me."

Ishiguro confesses in these interviews to deriving precious little pleasure during the composition of his novels (he cannot, for instance, recall a single day during the writing of his second novel that was enjoyable), and tells one interviewer, "Obviously there are times when a certain kind of satisfaction comes over you, but I don't remember enjoying the procedure of writing at any point. That is always a bit of a slog." This is not to suggest that Ishiguro is not satisfied with the finished products. In his first three novels, which he deems "three attempts to cover the same territory," Ishiguro creates aging characters that look back on their lives with a poignant combination of regret, nostalgia, and courage. As a young writer in his twenties, such characters may have been out of his empirical reach, but Ishiguro manages to convey their stories in a convincing and moving voice. That he manages to have his first-person protagonists tell more than they can say in these early novels is a testament to his native literary gifts and fellow feeling.

Ishiguro has garnered the admiration of many noted novelists; it would be fair to label him a "writer's writer." Salman Rushdie, the author whom Ishiguro credits for opening up English fiction to non-ethnically British writers, praises

his handling of traditional literary themes in a new way; Margaret Atwood finds *Never Let Me Go* to be representative of Ishiguro's thoughtful and subtle portrayals of disquieting subjects; and Anita Brookner, Pico Iyer, and Graham Swift have also sung his praises. Ishiguro is equally generous with his praise of other contemporary novelists. He expresses amazement and humility when an interviewer groups him with the likes of Rushdie, Timothy Mo, Julian Barnes, and Ian McEwan, even though, like most post-romantic creative writers, he resists being grouped together with any particular set of artists.

The interviews also illuminate Ishiguro's various relationships with different segments of his reading public, from the casual reader of his fiction, to the literary reviewer of a major newspaper or journal, to the academic critic. We learn that he is attentive to critical observations made about his work; these broaden his understanding of what he is actually achieving and of whether or not his conscious efforts have been realized. In the early years, for example, he was made aware of an accomplishment in his writing—the spare and temperate voice of his narrators—that he had not even consciously attempted. And gauging the great variety of his readership has helped him steer clear of merely local or arbitrary themes and concerns. For instance, he imagines how a Norwegian reader might respond to a peculiarly English phrase or personality quirk were it to appear, in translation, in one of his novels. Such awareness of cultural differences and expectations, Ishiguro maintains, has made him a more thoughtful critic of his own work and has improved his finished products.

Ishiguro in his interviews restrains his disappointment over the mixed reception of his most experimental work, his fourth novel, *The Unconsoled*, which possesses a Kafkaesque dreamscape instead of the comparatively realistic landscapes of his first three novels. It turns out that many admirers of Ishiguro expected him to write the same sort of finely chiseled, "Jamesian" book that jettisoned his career. Yet this is precisely the book that Ishiguro, at that time, wished to avoid writing. As he aged, he tells Maya Jaggi, he wanted to write "something that would reflect the uncertainty and chaos I started to feel." Nevertheless, some readers maintain that the more absurdist elements of *The Unconsoled* were "redeemed" by Ishiguro's "return" to the more superficially realistic situations in his fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans*, which also is about a deluded but sympathetic character, Christopher Banks, who spends his life searching for—and hoping to be reunited with—his missing parents. In the light of this argument, one

wonders what to make of the trajectory of Ishiguro's narrative art with his very realistic—perhaps even surrealistic or hyperrealistic—yet also futuristic sixth novel, *Never Let Me Go*, in which children are cloned and raised to be organ donors to lengthen the lives of their human sponsors.

Ishiguro's novels defy easy categorization. While there are strong family resemblances among them—most notably the first three, which form a trilogy of aging protagonists reflecting upon disappointing pasts and disillusioned presents—each is also highly idiosyncratic and innovative. What unites them all is the author's explorations of real or imagined historical crises—the post-bomb Nagasaki of *A Pale View of Hills*, the war-torn, besieged Shanghai of the 1930s of *When We Were Orphans*, the parallel universe of genetic engineering in contemporary England of *Never Let Me Go*—as a means of plumbing the depths and shallows of his protagonists' anguished interior landscapes. Although Ishiguro's novels are arguably more overtly concerned with emotional and psychological matters than with historical ones, it is certainly no accident that he sets all of his novels, as Margaret Atwood maintains, "against tenebrous historical backdrops."

The interviews collected here chart Kazuo Ishiguro's evolving self-reflections and artistic and intellectual concerns. We have sought to collect interviews that represent all manners of this diverse genre: the author engaged in casual conversation as well as in more intensely and systematically philosophical dialogues with people from many corners of the globe whose affiliations range from print journalism and radio to academic institutions. Some of these interviews are short and of a general nature, while others are longer and aim to sustain a particular discussion in an exhaustive fashion. Because of the preponderance of interviews Ishiguro gives during each book tour with the inevitable repetition of certain utterances, we have selected ones which best represent concisely the evolution of his artistic sensibilities. Each interview here illuminates an important aspect of the author's career that now spans more than a quarter century.

In keeping with the format of the Literary Conversations Series, the interviews in this volume are reprinted as they first appeared and are presented in chronological order according to when they were first conducted. We have omitted introductory remarks concerning biography that appear in the original interviews, as these are replicated elsewhere and can be found here in the Chronology.

We would like to thank Kazuo Ishiguro for more than a dozen years (and counting) of cherished acquaintanceship and inspiration; Seetha Srinivasan, Walter Biggins, and Shane Gong of the University Press of Mississippi for guidance in developing this volume; and Valerie Jones for preparing the index.

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CFW would like to thank the Department of English at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center for monies to travel twice to England to meet with Ishiguro; and to Grace A. Crummett for her enduring inspiration.

BWS
CFW

Chronology

1954	Born on 8 November in Nagasaki, Japan. Son of Shizuo and Shizuko Ishiguro.
1960	Ishiguro family moves to Guildford, Surrey; Shizuo, a research oceanographer, accepts a job with the British government.
1960–66	Attends Stoughton Primary School, in Guildford.
1966–73	Attends Woking County Grammar School.
1973–74	Completes schooling; grouse-beater for Queen Mother at Balmoral Castle; hitchhikes in North America.
1974–78	Attends University of Kent in Canterbury, where he earns his BA in English and Philosophy.
1975–76	Suspends studies; begins writing fiction; works as a community worker in Glasgow area housing estate.
1979	Works with the homeless at a resettlement center in London. Meets his future wife, Lorna Anne MacDougall.
1979–80	Attends creative writing program at the University of East Anglia, completing an MA. Studies with Angela Carter and Malcolm Bradbury.
1980–81	Publishes first short story and moves to Cardiff, Wales. Commissioned to write a novel. Publishes three short stories in Faber anthology: *Introductions 7: Stories by New Writers*. Moves to London with Lorna, summer 1981.
1981–82	Works with the homeless in London.
1982	*A Pale View of Hills* (winner of the Winifred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature). Selected as part of Twenty Best of Young British Novelists national promotion. Turns to writing full-time. Becomes a British citizen.
1984	Channel 4 TV-drama, *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* (screenwriter), aired.

1986	*An Artist of the Floating World* (winner of the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and shortlisted for the Booker Prize). Marries Lorna Anne MacDougall. Channel 4 TV-drama, *The Gourmet* (screenwriter), aired. Travels in East Asia.
1989	*The Remains of the Day* (winner of the Booker Prize). Visits Japan for the first time in nearly three decades.
1990	Awarded honorary doctorate by the University of Kent, Canterbury.
1992	Birth of daughter Naomi.
1993	Feature film of *The Remains of the Day* (Merchant-Ivory Productions) receives eight Academy Award nominations.
1994	Jury member at Cannes Film Festival.
1995	*The Unconsoled* (winner of the Cheltenham Prize). Awarded honorary doctorate by the University of East Anglia. Awarded the Italian Premio Scanno for Literature. Receives the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to literature.
1998	Receives the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Awarded the Italian Premio Mantova.
2000	*When We Were Orphans* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize).
2003	*The Saddest Music in the World* (feature film original screenplay). Awarded honorary doctorate by the University of St. Andrews.
2005	*Never Let Me Go* (winner of the Italian Serono Prize and the German Corine International Book Prize; shortlisted for the Booker Prize). *The White Countess* (feature film original screenplay), Merchant-Ivory Productions.

Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro

An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Gregory Mason / 1986

From *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1989) .

In January 1987, Kazuo Ishiguro confirmed his position as Britain's leading young novelist. He was awarded the Whitbread Book of the Year Prize, the largest such cash prize in Britain, for his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*. Born in Nagasaki in 1954, Ishiguro left Japan at the age of five and has not returned since. In most respects he has become thoroughly English, but as a writer he still draws considerably on his early childhood memories of Japan, his family upbringing, and the great Japanese films of the fifties.

Soon after publishing a few short stories, Ishiguro jumped to prominence in 1982 with his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills. A Pale View of Hills* was awarded the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize and has since been translated into eleven languages. With great subtlety, Ishiguro presents a first-person narrator, Etsuko, a middle-aged Japanese woman, now exiled in England some thirty years after World War II. Traumatized by the recent suicide of her elder daughter, she tells her own story and that of a wayward friend in postwar Nagasaki before she left. Her enigmatic recall, tantalizingly hamstrung by gaps and internal inconsistencies, works toward a disquieting and haunting revelation, masterfully embedded in the point of view itself.

Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, is set in the Japan of the late forties. Ono, an aging painter, gropes in his diary entries toward a realization of the ironies of Japan's recent history, in which his own earlier, sincere convictions have enmeshed him. The gently ironic conclusion leaves Ono both humiliated and dignified, a kind of comic Everyman figure, wistfully trapped within his own horizons. Once more the first-person perspective allows Ishiguro to finesse the confines of a linear plot, and again the author evinces an extraordinary control of voice, an uncannily Japanese quality emanating from his perfectly pitched English prose.

This interview took place on December 8, 1986, in Mr. Ishiguro's South London home. Throughout the course of his remarks, Ishiguro emerges as his own most discriminating interpreter and sternest critic. His meticulous interest in the craft of fiction and lucid grasp of his own aims and methods make this conversation an unusually valuable introduction and companion to the author's works.

Q. How did your family's move in 1960 from Japan to England affect your upbringing and education?
A. My parents have remained fairly Japanese in the way they go about things, and being brought up in a family you tend to operate the way that family operates. I still speak to my parents in Japanese. I'll switch back into Japanese as soon as I walk through the door. But my Japanese isn't very good. It's like a five-year-old's Japanese, mixed in with English vocabulary, and I use all the wrong forms. Apart from that, I've had a typical English education. I grew up in the south of England and went to a typical British school. At Kent University, I studied philosophy and English, and at East Anglia I did an M.A. in creative writing.

Q. Do you feel you're writing in any particular tradition?
A. I feel that I'm very much of the Western tradition. And I'm quite often amused when reviewers make a lot of my being Japanese and try to mention the two or three authors they've vaguely heard of, comparing me to Mishima or something. It seems highly inappropriate. I've grown up reading Western fiction: Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens.

Q. Are there any influences from the Japanese side as well?
A. Tanizaki, Kawabata, Ibuse, and a little Soseki, perhaps. But I'm probably more influenced by Japanese movies. I see a lot of Japanese films. The visual images of Japan have a great poignancy for me, particularly in domestic films like those of Ozu and Naruse, set in the postwar era, the Japan I actually remember.

Q. Your first novel, *A Pale View of Hills,* also deals with memories of Japan, but they are repressed memories with ellipses that the reader has to work to fill in.
A. Yes. In that book, I was trying something rather odd with the narrative. The main strategy was to leave a big gap. It's about a Japanese woman, Etsuko, who is exiled in Britain in middle age, and there's a certain area of her life that's very painful to her. It has something to do with her coming over to the West

and the effect it has on her daughter, who subsequently commits suicide. She talks all around it, but she leaves that as a gap. Instead, she tells another story altogether, going back years and talking about somebody she once knew. So the whole narrative strategy of the book was about how someone ends up talking about things they cannot face directly through other people's stories. I was trying to explore that type of language, how people use the language of self-deception and self-protection.

Q. There are certain things, a bit like in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw,* that are just unresolved. For instance, in the pivotal scene on the bridge when Etsuko is talking to her friend Sachiko's daughter Mariko, she switches without warning to addressing the child as if she herself were actually the child's mother. At the most extreme, that leads the reader to ponder whether the two women were not one and the same person.
A. What I intended was this: because it's really Etsuko talking about herself, and possibly that somebody else, Sachiko, existed or did not exist, the meanings that Etsuko imputes to the life of Sachiko are obviously the meanings that are relevant to her (Etsuko's) own life. Whatever the facts were about what happened to Sachiko and her daughter, they are of interest to Etsuko now because she can use them to talk about herself. So you have this highly Etsuko-ed version of this other person's story; and at the most intense point, I wanted to suggest that Etsuko had dropped this cover. It just slips out: she's now talking about herself. She's no longer bothering to put it in the third person.

Q. I thought that the effect of this scene was quite stunning.
A. Yes, that scene itself works all right, if the rest of the book had built up to that kind of ambiguity. But the trouble is that the flash-backs are too clear, in a way. They seem to be related with the authority of some kind of realistic fiction. It doesn't have the same murkiness of someone trying to wade through their memories, trying to manipulate memories, as I would have wanted. The mode is wrong in those scenes of the past. They don't have the texture of memory. And for that reason the ending doesn't quite come off. It's just too sudden. I intended with that scene for the reader finally to realize, with a sense of inevitability, "Of course, yes, she's finally said it." Instead, it's a shock. I didn't quite have the technical sophistication to pull it off, and the result is that it's a bit baffling. Fortunately, a lot of people quite enjoy being baffled. As you say, you're knocked over sideways. You feel you have to read the book again, which is a different sort of effect.

Q. There is a dissonace between the picture that Etsuko paints of herself when back in Japan as a very timid, conventional person and the rather bold, unconventional things she emerges as actually having done: leaving her husband, leaving her homeland, and so on. That's another gap the reader has to wrestle with.
A. Yes, that's the gap in *A Pale View of Hills*. We can assume that the real Etsuko of the past is somewhat nearer the mousy Etsuko she talks about in the forties than she is to the Sachiko figure. After all, that is her account, the emotional story of how she came to leave Japan, although that doesn't tell you the actual facts. But I'm not interested in the solid facts. The focus of the book is elsewhere, in the emotional upheaval.

Q. In some ways, especially in the dream sections, it seems as if Etsuko is trying to punish herself. She lashes herself with grief and guilt at the suicide of her daughter Keiko. Yet in other ways, it seems as if she's trying to rearrange the past so that she doesn't come out of it too badly. Am I right in seeing these two things?
A. Yes, the book is largely based around her guilt. She feels a great guilt, that out of her own emotional longings for a different sort of life, she sacrificed her first daughter's happiness. There is that side to her that feels resistant to her younger daughter Nikki, who tells her, "You've got nothing to worry about," and that she did exactly the right things. She feels that this isn't quite a true account. But on the other hand, she does need to arrange her memories in a way that allows her to salvage some dignity.

Q. There were some partly developed comic themes in *A Pale View of Hills,* but they didn't quite take hold.
A. Yes, whatever echoes I wanted to start between Etsuko and Ogata, the father-in-law, very much faded away. Let's say I was a less experienced writer at that point, and I think that one of the things that happens to less experienced writers is that you cannot control the book, as more experienced writers can. You bring in an element without realizing what the implication of this is on the rest of the book. A lot of the things I was initially most interested in got completely upstaged by things I almost inadvertently set in motion. But you get very excited when you're writing your first novel. And once having figured out these clever little narrative strategies, then you bring in this and you bring in that, and suddenly you find that two-thirds of the book is concerned with something else altogether. The Etusko–Sachiko story about exile and parental responsibility

was essentially something which I waylaid myself into. I often would bring in things simply because they worked rather nicely on that particular page in that particular chapter. And suddenly, I'd find myself with a daughter who'd hung herself, or whatever, on my hands and I'd have to figure out how to deal with that. If you really want to write something, you shouldn't bring things into your book lightly. It's a bit like taking in lodgers. They're going to be with you a long time. I think the most important thing I learned between writing the first and second novels is the element of thematic discipline.

Q. What drew you to your subject and to the theme of the older artist in your second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World?* Were you thinking of anyone in particular, or of any groups?
A. Not really, no. I suppose I was thinking of myself and my peers, the generation that came to university in the sixties and the seventies. I write out of a kind of projected fear of reaching a certain age and looking back. I am interested in that particular form of wasting one's talents, not because you spent your whole life lying on your back, not doing anything. I'm interested in people who, in all sincerity, work very hard and perhaps courageously in their lifetimes toward something, fully believing that they're contributing to something good, only to find that the social climate has done a topsy-turvy on them by the time they've reached the ends of their lives. The very things they thought they could be proud of have now become things they have to be ashamed of. I'm drawn to that period in Japanese history because that's what happened to a whole generation of people. They lived in a moral climate that right up until the end of the war said that the most praise-worthy thing they could do was to use their talents to further the nationalist cause in Japan, only to find after the war that this had been a terrible mistake. *An Artist of the Floating World* is an exploration of somebody trying to come to terms with the fact that he has somehow misused his talents unknowingly, simply because he didn't have any extraordinary power of insight into the world he lived in.

Q. Where is *An Artist of the Floating World* set?
A. It's just an imaginary city, for various reasons. Once I set it in an actual city, then the obligation to actually check up would become boringly relevant, and there seemed to be no point. It was of no value to me if I could claim that it's authentically set in Tokyo or not. In fact, in many ways it would play into the

hands of a certain kind of misreader, who wished the book to be simply some kind of realist text telling you what Tokyo was like after the war. By setting it in an unspecified venue, I could suggest that I'm offering this as a novel about people and their lives, and that this isn't some piece of documentary writing about a real city. And it just gave me a lot more freedom. If I wanted a pavilion with lanterns around its eaves, I could just invent one. I could invent as many districts as I could think of names. All these things would have been technically rather irksome, if I had had to keep referring to a map, and to the actual history of Tokyo.

The other temptation was to set it in Nagasaki, the only Japanese city I have some familiarity with, and which I could have got some people to tell me about. But of course, overwhelmingly for Western readers, when you bring in Nagasaki they think of the atomic bomb, and I had no place for the atomic bomb in this novel. And so, although possibly I might have been able to refer more or less authentically to Nagasaki landmarks and districts, I didn't want to do it simply because it would have been another bomb book.

Q. Was there any particular reason why you had your central character be a painter, rather than a writer, or even an actor?
A. No great reason, no. I was not intrinsically interested in painting or painters. It just seemed to me that a painter served my purposes better than some of the other careers. I think it's always dangerous to have a writer in a novel. That leads you into all kinds of areas, unless you're specifically interested in talking about the nature of fiction. But I try to avoid that very postmodern element in my books.

Q. Did you do any research into how painters' groups at the time behaved? What props did you have in imagining these scenes?
A. I did very little research, primarily because research is only of any interest to me in order to check up after I've done something, to make sure I'm not getting anything wildly wrong. I need certain things to be the way they are in my books for the purposes of my themes. In *An Artist of the Floating World,* I needed to portray this world where a leader figure held this incredible psychological sway over his subordinates. And for subordinates to break free, they had to display a remarkable amount of determination. That's what I needed, and as far as I was concerned, things in my Japan were going to operate like that. I am not essentially concerned with a realist purpose in writing.

I just invent a Japan which serves my needs. And I put that Japan together out of little scraps, out of memories, out of speculation, out of imagination.

Q. In some respects, you have a narrative setup in *An Artist of the Floating World* similar to that in *A Pale View of Hills*. The whole narrative is recounted by a person who is somewhat unreliable, so the reader has to attend to other things to gauge the extent of the unreliability. Ono, the narrator, addresses the reader directly with the book's opening sentence: "If on a sunny day you climb the steep path . . . ." This strikes an almost intimate tone, as if he is talking to a friend or acquaintance. Elsewhere, his account sounds more like an apologia, a public explanation for what he did. Who is the "reader" here, and what exactly is the narrative situation?
A. The reader that I intended obviously isn't the "you" that Ono refers to. Ono in his narrative assumes that anybody reading it must live in the city and must be aware of its landmarks. I used that device mainly to create a world. I thought it helped strengthen this mental landscape mapped out entirely by what Ono was conscious of, and nothing else. And whether the reader registers it consciously or not, it cannot help but create the effect of actually eavesdropping on Ono being intimate with somebody in his own town. To a large extent, the reason for Ono's downfall was that he lacked a perspective to see beyond his own environment and to stand outside the actual values of his time. So the question of this parochial perspective was quite central to the book, and I tried to build that into the whole narrative. At the same time, I'm suggesting that Ono is fairly normal; most of us have similar parochial visions. So the book is largely about the inability of normal human beings to see beyond their immediate surroundings, and because of this, one is at the mercy of what this world immediately around one proclaims itself to be.

Q. With the somewhat doddery narrator's constant digressions, the plot line keeps fanning out all the time. Does this suggest that you're trying to escape from the tyranny of a linear plot?
A. Yes, yes it does! I don't like the idea that A has to come before B and that B has to come before C because the plot dictates it. I want certain things to happen in a certain order, according to how I feel the thing should be arranged tonally or whatever. I can have Ono in a certain kind of emotional mood or emotional way of talking about things when I want him to be, and it looks like he's just drifted, but from my point of view, it's quite contrived. I've figured

out little transitory connecting paragraphs whereby he appears to drift from one section to the next. This might give the sense of his being old and vulnerable, but people do tend to talk like this anyway. And more crucially, people tend to think like this. So I'm not dictated to by the chronology of events, and I can reveal things just when I want to.

Q. And again, there are unresolved points of fact in the narrative, open to varying constructions by the reader.
A. Yes. As usual, I'm not overwhelmingly interested in what really did happen. What's important is the emotional aspect, the actual positions the characters take up at different points in the story, and why they need to take up these positions.

Q. At the same time, you draw a very explicit thematic parallel between the way Ono's mentor treated him, confiscating his pictures and expelling him from his villa, and the way that Ono subsequently treats his own pupil, Kuroda.
A. I'm pointing to the master-pupil thing recurring over and over again in the world. In a way, I'm using Japan as a sort of metaphor. I'm trying to suggest that this isn't something peculiar to Japan, the need to follow leaders and the need to exercise power over subordinates, as a sort of motor by which society operates. I'm inviting Western readers to look at this not as a Japanese phenomenon but as a human phenomenon.

Q. In the floating world of urban Tokugawa Japan, with its pleasure quarters and puppet plays, or at least in the art that came out of the floating world, irreconcilable conflicts are often resolved by melodramatic suicides. The title of your book, *An Artist of the Floating World,* necessarily conjures resonances of this whole tradition. Yet you offer a gently ironic, comic solution to your tale, somewhat at variance with the more melodramatic, conventional expectations of the genre. Life-affirming values prevail, rather than everything descending into a welter of despair or the cliché of suicide. The narrative does hint, at certain points, that Ono's family are worried about such a possibility. Instead, Ono owns up to his errors, makes his accommodation with the changing times, and still manages to cling to a measure of self-vindication. Were you in any sense offering an untraditional or even un-Japanese resolution to his conflict?
A. Well, you see, I don't feel that it is un-Japanese. A while ago, I published a short story entitled "A Family Supper." The story was basically just a big trick,

playing on Western readers' expectations about Japanese people who kill themselves. It's never stated, but Western readers are supposed to think that these people are going to commit mass suicide, and of course they do nothing of the sort.

This business about committing *seppuku* or whatever. It's as alien to me as it is to you. And it's as alien to most modern Japanese as it is to Western people. The Japanese are in love with these melodramatic stories where heroes commit suicide, but people in Japan don't go around killing themselves as easily as people in the West assume. And so my book may not have a traditional Japanese story ending in that sense, but a lot of the great Japanese movies of the fifties would not dream of having an ending like that. And if I borrow from any tradition, it's probably from that tradition that tries to avoid anything that is overtly melodramatic or plotty, that tries basically to remain within the realms of everyday experience.

I'm very keen that whenever I portray books that are set in Japan, even if it's not very accurately Japan, that people are seen to be just people. I ask myself the same questions about my Japanese characters that I would about English characters, when I'm asking the big questions, what's really important to them. My experience of Japanese people in this realm is that they're like everybody else. They're like me, my parents. I don't see them as people who go around slashing their stomachs.

Q. What sort of mood did you wish to portray in the narrator, Ono, by the end of the book?
A. I wanted that slightly painful and bittersweet feeling of him thinking: "Japan made a mess of it, but how marvelous that in a few years it's all set to have a completely fresh go. But a man's life isn't like that. In a man's life, there's only room for this one go." And Ono's done it, he made a go of it, and it didn't turn out well. His world is over, and all he can do is wish the younger generation well, but he is no part of that world. And I was interested in the various strategies somebody would employ to try to salvage some sort of dignity, to get into a position where he could say, "Well, at least X, Y, and Z." In a way, Ono is continually being cornered. He keeps having to admit this and admit that, and in the end he even accepts his own smallness in the world. I suppose I wanted to suggest that a person's dignity isn't necessarily dependent on what he achieves in his life or in his career; that there is something dignified about Ono in the end that arises simply out of his being human.

Q. And through the course of his narrative, the reader can see Ono, to preserve his self-esteem, gradually making concessions and accommodations that he himself cannot see?
A. Yes, that certainly was the intention. It uses very much the diary method. Technically, the advantage of the diary narrative is that each entry can be written from a different emotional position. What he writes in October 1948 is actually written out of a different set of assumptions than the pieces that are written later on. That really was the sole reason for dividing the book up into four chunks, each ostensibly written in a sitting or whatever at the point when the date is given: just so we can actually watch his progress, and so that the language itself changes slightly.

Q. And this in turn underscores the larger theme of the ironies and vicissitudes of the floating world. Having rejected the demimonde "floating world" subjects of his mentor, Ono received the patriotic award for his propagandist poster art and experienced a short moment of triumph. But this too was fleeting.
A. Yes, that's why he is the artist of the floating world, just as the floating world celebrated transitory pleasures. Even if they were gone by the morning, and they were built on nothing, at least you enjoyed them at the time. The idea is that there are no solid things. And the irony is that Ono had rejected that whole approach to life. But in the end, he too is left celebrating those pleasures that evaporated when the morning light dawned. So the floating world comes to refer, in the larger metaphorical sense, to the fact that the values of society are always in flux.

Q. Your first-person narrators, a late middle-aged woman in *A Pale View of Hills* and an older man in *An Artist of the Floating World,* are far removed from you in your personal situation. How did you manage to inhabit these people? Through some kind of imaginative migration?
A. It never occurred to me that it would be a technical difficulty. It's rather like the question about realism and Japanese details. I didn't start from the point of view of saying, "What does a middle-aged woman think like?" That way you can get very intimidated by the whole project. I needed a certain consciousness, a certain state of mind, and it just naturally followed that this would be a middle-aged woman or an older man. Ono couldn't be anything else.

Q. It is remarkable, for someone writing in English, how much of a Japanese texture your writing achieves. How, for instance, did you set about the

problem of projecting differentiated Japanese voices through the medium of the English language?
A. There are two things. Because I am writing in the first person, even the prose has to conform to the characterization of the narrator. Etsuko, in *A Pale View of Hills,* speaks in a kind of Japanese way because she's a Japanese woman. When she sometimes speaks about Japanese things, explaining what a *kujibiki* stand is, for instance, it becomes clear that she's speaking English and that it's a second language for her. So it has to have that kind of carefulness, and , particularly when she's reproducing Japanese dialogue in English, it has to have a certain foreignness about it.

The thing about Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* is that he's supposed to be narrating in Japanese; it's just that the reader is getting it in English. In a way the language has to be almost like a pseudotranslation, which means that I can't be too fluent and I can't use too many Western colloquialisms. It has to be almost like subtitles, to suggest that behind the English language there's a foreign language going on. I'm quite conscious of actually figuring these things out when I'm writing, using a certain kind of translationese. Sometimes my ear will say: "That doesn't quite ring true, that kind of language. Fine if this were just English people, but not here."

Q. When you write, do you have anyone who helps you to revise?
A. I tend to work entirely alone. I have an editor at Faber, Robert McCrum, who often sees the penultimate draft. In both novels, he made suggestions that were very helpful, but they tend to be pretty minor. Normally he'll point to that part of the book that seems to be weak and ask me to look at it again. But I'll only show him my manuscript when I think It's more or less finished. And I certainly don't do this business of going through the prose with somebody else, page by page.

Q. Do you feel any pressure to experiment formally?
A. I did at a certain time. When literary people talk about "young writers," they almost imply that this is synonymous with writers who are experimenting. You often read phrases like, "They're smashing up this, or subverting that." So I think that it's very natural to feel that the older generation has somehow already done that, and that now you've got to. But I try not to let it become too central to what I'm writing. The kind of book I find very tedious is the kind of book whose *raison d'être* is to say something about literary form. I'm only interested in literary experiment insofar as it serves a purpose

of exploring certain themes with an emotional dimension. I always try to disguise those elements of my writing that I feel perhaps are experimental.

Q. What are you working on now?
A. I'm writing another novel. This one is set in England. It's about a butler who wants to get close to a great man, close to the center of history. I also write television films. I've written two of these and we're trying to get a third off the ground, this time a cinema film. So I've always got at least two things going, a screenplay and a novel. Filmmaking is very, very different from writing. You shoot to a set schedule, and the crew knocks off at a certain time; otherwise you pay a fortune in overtime. You just haven't got the opportunity to keep doing scenes over and over till they're perfect. It's almost like a concert performance or something, where you've got to get it right, then and there. It's somewhere between a performance art and the more meditative, deliberate production that writing is. In writing, you can rewrite and rewrite and rewrite at no cost, other than what it costs for the paper, and you can spend a long, long time.

Q. How do you see your work developing, and what do you see as your abiding preoccupations?
A. Well, it's very difficult to say if I'll have the same preoccupations in ten years' time that I have today. There are certain things in my books that I'm not particularly interested in, although they have taken up a fairly important chunk of my writing. I'm not particularly interested in themes about parental responsibility, or even about exile, although these seem to be very much to the fore in the first book. I'm not all interested in the question of suicide, although I'm aware that that has been in both books in some form or another. But things like memory, how one uses memory for one's own purposes, one's own ends, those things interest me more deeply. And so, for the time being, I'm going to stick with the first person, and develop the whole business about following somebody's thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves.

In Conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro

Christopher Bigsby / 1987

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Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954, but was raised in England. He studied at the University of Kent and, as part of the creative writing programme, at the University of East Anglia. His first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), were both set in a Japan which he had in part invented. These were followed by the immensely successful *The Remains of the Day* (1989), set in pre-war Britain and narrated by an elderly butler whose belief in loyalty and personal dignity allows him to compromise more fundamental values. *The Unconsoled* was published in 1995, followed by *When We Were Orphans* in 2000. This interview was conducted in 1987, during the writing of *The Remains of the Day*.

Bigsby: You were born in Japan, but left at the age of five and were brought up in England. Do you have any memories of that earlier life back of Japan?
Ishiguro: Oddly enough, I do. People find this remarkable but I do have very vivid memories, though they may be inaccurate. I think that possibly they are so vivid because there was such an enormous change in my life and if there is such a change you have something to anchor your memories to. What I recall is nothing monumental. I am sure there were significant things that happened to me in the first five years of my life, but I just remember ordinary things like standing in a street with my grandfather looking at a film poster, or cutting my thumb with a pair of scissors. These very little things have somehow stayed. But I have a vast array of such memories.

Bigsby: How far, once you were in this country, did you find yourself playing the young immigrant role of mediating between your parents and what, presumably, to them was much more of an alien culture?

Literature / Biography

Kazuo Ishiguro says

"I feel I have to know the fictional landscape in which my novel takes place very well. That's the landscape I have to research, not any actual chunk of history or real country."

Brian W. Shaffer is professor of English and dean of academic affairs for faculty development at Rhodes College. He is the author of *The Blinding Torch: Modern British Fiction and the Discourse of Civilization* and *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*, among other works. **Cynthia F. Wong** is associate professor of English at the University of Colorado at Denver. She is the author of *Writers and Their Work: Kazuo Ishiguro*.

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