

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (novel): A Review

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Author	Haruki Murakami
Original title	<i>Noruei no Mori</i> ノルウェイの森
Translator	Alfred Birnbaum (1989) Jay Rubin (2000)
Country	Japan
Language	Japanese
Genre	Coming of age novel, romance novel
Publisher	Kodansha
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The title of the book is a Beatles track. And as you listen to the track for the first time after finishing the book, “I once had a girl.”, the book becomes almost tangible, with chills and nostalgia.

Set in retrospect, the book begins with the mention of a well. A deep well in the woods, easy to fall into, impossible to come out of. And I think it was a metaphorical foreshadowing of the fate of Toru. (Protagonist)

When a part of your life is ripped apart, to the point of no fix, you shut yourself down, numbing in your own suffering, in a downwards spiral, a routine you cannot break out of. This is worse when that part is a person who shaped who you're today.

That is what the book is about, living through suffering. As Murakami writes, "Death exists, not as the opposite, but a part of life." And you do understand that through the book.

The second theme this book explores is unrequited love. You cannot love someone until you're not mentally well. So you wait to be devoid of the "sickness." Sickness passed on to you when your love died, a sickness that will pass on to the person who waits for you.

This book is a ray of hope peeking through a sky of despair for me. Life goes on, irrespective of ups and downs. It does. You will either come to absolutely love it or feel the polar opposite.

For me, the book, in two words is simply, "Living through."

"Letters are just pieces of paper," I said. "Burn them, and what stays in your heart will stay; keep them, and what vanishes will vanish.

It makes me feel like I'm in a big meadow in a soft rain."

There were moments when my mind would thwart the efforts at the quotidien and just gaze into space imagining people, conversations and situations.

I have long shared a love-indifference relationship with Murakami's books. His characters seem surreal to me - sometimes with a foible I could relate to in myself and quickly metamorphosing into the freakish and the bizzare.

Norwegian Wood dwells over how certain relationships shape us, our lives, how memories have this funny way of making fireworks go off in your head in one instant and justly shatter them to smithereens in the next.

"Death exists - in a paperweight, in four red and white balls on a billiard table - and we go on living and breathing it into our lungs like fine dust"

It appeals to us individually in its imploration to be elusive, to escape into a dream, a chimera of sorts, feeding into our delusions that make the banal reality look less prosaic

It brings out our unreasonableness of being, our deepest fears and adolescent pangs that gets suppressed over age and not necessarily obliterated.

"But who can say what's best? That's why you need to grab whatever chance you have of happiness where you find it, and not worry about other people too much. My experience tells me that we get no more than two or three such chances in a life time, and if we let them go, we regret it for the rest of our lives"

So is it a story of a fervid teenager in love with a whimsical girl in a mental asylum with her outlandish middle aged friend ? -It probably is.

But I would fall short in explaining how it meant more.

Like longing that the book could mutate into a person whom I would love to befriend and know better.

The protagonist takes you back to the 60's, a decade you wish you could have lived through. The richness of Murakami's writing sometimes makes one want to delve into the multiple layers of symbolic meaning that it seems to carry. Or not.

It sways back and forth between characters that typify the shy, the hopeful, the resilient, the earnest, the selfish and the intense.

When the teenage protagonist, Toru starts his narration, I was briefly reminded of the Catcher in the Rye and of moments where one seems to run away from obstacles and decisions, hoping against hope that they would take care of themselves and resorting to ponder instead on happier times from the past.

"I want you always to remember me. Will you remember that I existed, and that I stood next to you here like this?"

His altercation within himself in realizing and accepting his intense love for a poignant Naoko or finding solace in the effervescent and passionate Midori, in having to isolate his quick fix in craving for the physical as a solution to his subliminal agony - it deeply descends into the darkness at places, making you crave for bright candy sunshine.

"I would stare at the grains of light suspended in that silent space, struggling to see into my own heart. What did I want?"

And what did others want from me? But I could never find the answers. Sometimes I would reach out and try to grasp the grains of light, but my fingers touched nothing"

It is a depressing novel for most parts - sadness is probably more compelling an emotion than gaiety. It is tranquil, romantic, sensual and even a tad bohemian at places.

"How much do you love me?" Midori asked. 'Enough to melt all the tigers in the world to butter,' I said."

It has countless references to western classics, to Beatles (whose album, 'Norwegian Wood' is where it borrows its title from) to Bach, Mozart, Joseph Conrad and Karl Marx.

It is a book that feels like it leaves behind a void, a feeling that you haven't really found what you were looking for, even past the last line.

Like the reminiscing about that long lost friend in that solitary moment while you wait at the cafe - one that results in a momentary loss of milieu until your soliloquy is interrupted by company.

For a book that has been celebrated as one of Murakami's best (one that apparently, 'everyone' in Japan has read), I sometimes fail to see why, during times of reason when I intensely disliked it - fortunately, the feeling soon dissipates.