

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
January 14, 2014

Hosts: Clyde Henry and Joyce Kessler

Novel: *Kafka on the Shore*, by Haruki Murakami

Papers:

Biographical: Catherine LaCroix

Critical: Whitney Lloyd

After rescheduling on account of last week's Polar Vortex weather, the January 2014 meeting of the Novel Club of Cleveland convened on a spring-like evening at the home of Joyce Kessler in Cleveland Heights. President Leon Gabinet called the meeting to order at approximately 8:20. One guest was introduced; no committee reports were offered. The Annual Meeting was set for Sunday, April 27, 2014, at the home of Jay and Toby Siegel.

Catherine LaCroix presented the biographical paper about the evening's author, Haruki Murakami.

Haruki Murakami, according to the *Paris Review*, is "arguably the most experimental **and** popular novelist" currently being translated from Japanese. His three-volume *The Windup Bird Chronicle* has been called the strangest hybrid narrative since *Tristram Shandy*.

Murakami was born in 1949 to a middle class family. His father taught Japanese literature at a university; his mother was a housewife who also taught Japanese literature. Haruki was born in Kyoto, but the family later moved to Kobe. Haruki learned to read English by reading crime novels he bought from sailors. His youthful pursuits were a disappointment to his parents, which seems reflected in the fact that his characters generally don't have living, present, or active parents. Haruki got married while at university, and soon opened a club named after his cat. He then decided to write a novel, which he now calls "an unimpressive youthful effort." His writing was first published in 1979; his first best-seller was *Norwegian Wood* in 1987. As of now he has published about a dozen novels as well as numerous other works, which have been translated into many languages. He writes in Japanese and employs several translators. He is presently one of the most highly recognized intellectuals in Japan.

Murakami writes till noon every day, and then spends time training for marathons. He spends about six months drafting a manuscript, and then another seven or eight months revising. He has observed that literature today can't be like nineteenth-century novels because the present-day leisure class

doesn't have the time for 'big books,' so fiction must change to 'grab people' in the small amount of time they have available.

Kafka on the Shore is based on Murakami's own memory of being 15 years old. He started writing it when he was 29. Since he has not studied Japanese literature, Murakami seems to borrow his style more from things he **has** read, such as American crime novels. Though he denies being influenced by other authors, readers may notice apparent influences from various elements of contemporary culture.

Whitney Lloyd presented the critical paper about *Kafka on the Shore*.

Whitney observed that on first reading, *Kafka on the Shore* was mystifying although clearly very imaginative. References to contemporary popular culture and also to classical literature prompt the reader to ponder relationships between the two. The main character's choice of the pseudonym "Kafka" and the appearance of his spiritual alter ego "named Crow," along with the allusions to the Oedipus myth in Kafka's abandonment by his mother and supposed "fate" of killing his father and bedding his mother and sister are among the most prominent examples of this intertwining. As is characteristic of magical realism, the reader must accept oddities in the narrative content. Some scenes are implausible or just weird, such as cats having personalities like interesting people (reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*). Also noteworthy are the later episodes of opening and closing the stone (associated with the death of Nakama), and the mystical forest where time becomes meaningless.

Whitney commented on other important characters, such as Oshima the librarian who helps guide Kafka, and the (perhaps surrogate, perhaps long-lost?) mother and sister characters, as well as the father figure perhaps fused with the Johnny Walker apparition and finally the endearing Nakata and his late-appearing supporter Hoshino. He noted that the writing is mostly spare in style, though with some very lyrical passages and with various philosophical remarks sprinkled throughout.

Critical commentary on the novel, Whitney reported, has been concerned with how the disparate elements of the story are related; whether the novel is primarily a coming-of-age story; the meaning of Nakata's death; the numerous unanswered riddles in the text; and the fact that the story clearly resembles a dream, but distinguishes itself by making the reader feel immersed in that dream. Murakami has said that the key to understanding is multiple readings of the novel.

Whitney supplied eight discussion questions, including as #8 an invitation to interpret the lyrics to the song "Kafka on the Shore" as included in the novel.

Discussion ranged freely among several of the questions, some of which (including #8) were not reached before time ran out.

The first issue raised was the extent to which Murakami has created some version of a modern Greek tragedy, since the allusions to the Oedipus story seem to point in that direction. Readers found the Oedipus allusions obvious; some felt they were used playfully, and some suggested that they were used to make Western readers feel at home in a Japanese setting. The plot parallels do not entirely reproduce an Oedipus story line, and the Aristotelian elements (such as well-defined hero, tragic flaw, and so on) are not clearly drawn. Oshima seems to some readers to be a Chorus-like voice, or to some more like the prophet Tiresias—though others found Nakata's friend the truckdriver Hoshino more interesting in the Chorus role.

This conversation segued into question #7, which asked how (apart from names and geographical references) we would identify the novel as Japanese. Responses to this issue included the observation that Hoshino's American baseball cap is typical modern Japanese garb, as well as comments on overall worldview: the conclusion, in which struggling (and partly supernatural) characters of the older generation all pass away leaving the child to return to reality as an adult, was cited as significantly Japanese. And relatedly, the novel's sense of time (a Buddhist, or generally Japanese, focus on importance of the present—with both past and future cast as very limited entities) was identified characteristically Japanese.

Other issues raised, arising either directly or indirectly from questions listed, included:

- reactions to the novel's conclusion: readers found the novel's fluidity entertaining, but its structure somewhat unformed, leaving numerous suggestions unresolved by the end;
- possibly hybrid nature of the book, including Japanese elements (time sense and some style elements) with world culture (including inclusion of World War II plot concerns which are **uncharacteristic** of Japanese outlook);
- awareness of the book's homage to Anton Kafka—in the title and main character's pseudonym, of course, and naming of his alter ego "the boy called Crow"—but also the surrealistic atmosphere, the difficult father/son relationship, and the hybrid-culture worldview which remind some readers of Kafka's works;
- sexual content of the novel—focus on male point of view throughout the novel was noted, and considered possibly a typically Japanese feature; explicitness and coarseness of sex scenes was discomforting for some, though others noted this is typical and virtually de rigueur for contemporary novelists.

When discussion had touched on and ranged beyond five of the eight offered questions, President Gabinet noted that adjournment time had arrived.

Members continued their conversations during last visits to the refreshment table, and thus another meeting concluded.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol Fox