

## ISHIGURO'S AFFINITIES

His writing comes out of the realistic nineteenth-century tradition, with innovators such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. This was when the novel opened its window onto the quotidian world. Ishiguro too is an innovator, always taking risks. With every new book he investigates a new genre-mix, with elements of the detective story, science fiction, myth...The window of the novel has always been wide. Ishiguro has widened it even more.

What about early twentieth-century modernism? Did it never happen? It is hard to imagine Ishiguro without Kafka, but also without Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and others who have explored new literary terrain, in particular human consciousness. This is where to situate Ishiguro on the literary map.

Sara Danius, "Award Ceremony Speech," Stockholm, December 10, 2017. [Nobelprize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org/awards-ceremony-speech).

I should say here that I have, on a number of other occasions, learned crucial lessons from the voices of singers. I refer here less to the lyrics being sung, and more to the actual singing. As we know, a human voice in song is capable of expressing an unfathomably complex blend of feelings. Over the years, specific aspects of my writing have been influenced by, among others, Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, Emmylou Harris, Ray Charles, Bruce Springsteen, Gillian Welch and my friend and collaborator Stacey Kent. Catching something in their voices, I've said to myself: 'Ah yes, that's it. That's what I need to capture in that scene. Something very close to that.' Often it's an emotion I can't quite put into words, but there it is, in the singer's voice, and now I've been given something to aim for.

Kazuo Ishiguro, "My Twentieth Century Evening—and Other Small Breakthroughs," Nobel Lecture, Stockholm, December 7, 2017. [Nobelprize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org/awards-ceremony-speech).

If we are to play an important role in this uncertain future, if we are to get the best from the writers of today and tomorrow, I believe we must become more diverse. I mean this in two particular senses.

Firstly, we must widen our common literary world to include many more voices from beyond our comfort zones of the elite first world cultures. We must search more energetically to discover the gems from what remain today unknown literary cultures, whether the writers live in far away countries or within our own communities. Second: we must take great care not to set too narrowly or conservatively our definitions of what constitutes good literature. The next generation

will come with all sorts of new, sometimes bewildering ways to tell important and wonderful stories. We must keep our minds open to them, especially regarding genre and form, so that we can nurture and celebrate the best of them. In a time of dangerously increasing division, we must listen. Good writing and good reading will break down barriers. We may even find a new idea, a great humane vision, around which to rally.

Ibid.

### READING THE NOVEL

Inevitably, it being set in an alternate Britain, in an alternate 1990s, this novel will be described as science fiction. But there's no science here. How are the clones kept alive once they've begun "donating"? Who can afford this kind of medicine, in a society the author depicts as no richer, indeed perhaps less rich, than ours?

Ishiguro's refusal to consider questions such as these forces his story into a pure rhetorical space. You read by pawing constantly at the text, turning it over in your hands, looking for some vital seam or row of rivets. Precisely how naturalistic is it supposed to be? Precisely how parabolic?

M. John Harrison, "[Clone Alone](#)," *Guardian*, February 26, 2005.

In extrapolating from our own society, Ishiguro's science-fiction premise also of course sends us back to it. Reading Miss Lucy's speech ["you've been told and not told..." (81)], it is hard not to speculate about intended comparisons to upward mobility in the present. Here and now, in the absence of segregated clones or a system of obligatory organ removal masquerading as voluntary "donation," it is almost equally certain that the futures the vast majority of children dream of will not be realized. The organ-donation gulag, tucked away from public view and yet not kept secret, has its obvious real-world counterpart in what we call class. Doesn't class divide just as effectively, allowing some of us to expect a reasonable return on our career investments while deviously ensuring that little will come of any expectations the rest may have?<sup>2</sup> What difference does it make that class origin, in our society, does not define an official identity—a box to be checked on the census form, or grounds for compulsory segregation during childhood? We too have schools that resemble prisons and prisons where almost everyone seems to be from the same background. There is pervasive censorship in the cloned children's "progressive" school, as we can see when Miss

Lucy defies it, and yet—this is one of the more striking ironies of the science fiction premise—the expectationless in the twenty-first century USA are probably told less of the truth about what will turn out to be their destiny than they are in Ishiguro's brave new world.

Bruce Robbins, "[Cruelty Is Bad: Banality and Proximity in \*Never Let Me Go\*](#)," *Novel* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 292.