

## What is “Murakamiesque” to Americans?

### —Considering Americans’ Preference of Haruki

### Murakami’s Wind-Up Bird and Kafka—

#### Introduction

“A Wild Haruki Chase: How the World Is Reading and Translating Murakami,” an international symposium held at the University of Tokyo in March 2006, did not just mark a turning point in Haruki Murakami’s career as a writer; it demonstrated that the United States was definitely something in the Worldwide Murakami phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> In that cosmopolitan assembly, with translators of Murakami and literary critics gathered from around the world, one could easily acknowledge that special emphasis was placed on the participants from the United States. Richard Powers, a contemporary American writer, gave the keynote speech as a representative of all the participants, and Jay Rubin, Professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University and a translator of Murakami’s works such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Norwegian Wood*, was also one of five participants representing the translators in the panel discussion. The United States is the most responsible for the English translations of Haruki Murakami’s works. This is not just because those who have translated his stories into English so far—Alfred Birnbaum, Jay Rubin, and Philip

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<sup>1</sup> The symposium was held at the University of Tokyo on March 25, 2006, with two workshops following on the next day. Smaller symposiums were also held in Kobe and Sapporo on March 29.

Gabriel—are all American; it is because the U.S. was where the first English translation of Murakami circulated and remains the English-speaking country where his works are the most widely read.

There are some critiques that venture to discuss how Haruki Murakami's works are read in the United States, but they all pursue the reasons why the American public generally like his books and do not attempt to consider how each work has been read differently.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to grasp Murakami's popularity in America in general terms, however, since Americans obviously prefer certain works by him: *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore*. Therefore, this paper will consider Murakami's popularity in the U.S. from a new perspective by focusing on how these two works have been read there.

*Wind-Up Bird*, published in 1997, had been the most widely accepted in the U.S. until *Kafka's* publication there and has often been referred to as Murakami's masterpiece, which is a phenomenon peculiar to America in contrast to how his *Norwegian Wood* achieved enormous popularity in Japan and China.<sup>3</sup> When *Kafka* came to the U.S. in January 2005, however, it almost seemed to topple *Wind-Up Bird's* status as a Murakami masterpiece; *Kafka*

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<sup>2</sup> The following are representatives of critiques on Murakami's reception in the U.S.:  
Hirata, Hosea. "Amerika de yomareru murakami haruki: 'fun' na taiken." *Kokubungaku* 40.4 (1995): 100-104.

Keezing, Michael Fujimoto. "What Makes Him So Good?: An American Writer's Perspective on Haruki Murakami." Trans. Hisayo Ogushi. *Eureka* 32.4 (1998): 72-75.

Kelts, Roland. "Murakami Haruki ni tsuite kataru toki ni wareware no kataru koto." *Wochi Kochi* 12 (2006): 12-15.

<sup>3</sup> Maryles, Daisy. "Behind the Bestsellers: Tokyo's Treasure." *Publishers Weekly* 252 (2005): 24.

was the first of Murakami's books to become a national bestseller there. This seems to indicate that Americans preferred Kafka to *Wind-Up Bird*, but closer analysis of the reviews of the former will reveal that even with its success, Kafka lacked something. The defects of Kafka, whose length and story resemble those of *Wind-Up Bird*, will prove that in a sense, *Wind-Up Bird* is superior to Kafka and thus deserves to be called Murakami's masterpiece. Assuming that the advantages of both *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore* must be what not only American scholars but also the American public expect from Haruki Murakami, this paper will conclude by suggesting which elements Murakami should include in his future works to continue being credited in the United States.

#### Similarities of *Wind-Up Bird* and Kafka

Before analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of both, it is necessary to consider what *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore* have in common to fully understand their differences later. Although Kafka became a national bestseller in the United States, an achievement which *Wind-Up Bird* could never have made and which we will see in further detail later, one cannot doubt how well the two works resemble each other. One obvious resemblance is their length. Even though it experienced extensive cutting of the original Japanese version, the English version of *Wind-Up Bird* still consists of at least 600 pages (the paperback has 607 pages), the longest of all Murakami works. On the other hand, the hardcover version of Kafka has 436 pages, being the second longest, while the average

length of a Murakami novel is 300 pages or 400 at the longest. Thus, both *Wind-Up Bird* and *Kafka* are longer works; the author must have put tremendous efforts in writing them and tried to produce them as works of importance.

The two major works also resemble each other in their surrealism, which is one element among others that American reviewers found attractive, in contrast to the realism seen in *Norwegian Wood*.<sup>4</sup> Consider John Updike's following review: "Haruki Murakami's new novel, 'Kafka on the Shore,' [...] is a real page-turner, as well as an insistently metaphysical mind-bender" (91). To be reviewed by an important writer like Updike in *The New Yorker* itself seems to be an accomplishment, since many other reviews mention this fact. Thus, not only does being reviewed by Updike but also the fact that he praises *Kafka* in this sentence adds credit to the novel. Here he uses the term "metaphysical" to explain the surrealism in *Kafka*, and tells us how the surrealism has a hallucinatory effect on us. Surrealism in *Kafka* refers to things such as Nakata, one of two protagonists, talking to cats, or fish and leeches falling from the sky. Just as Toru Okada goes to a different room through the wall of a well in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, mysterious things happen in *Kafka*, too, and American scholars are interested in them. Compared to the realistic *Norwegian Wood*, *Wind-Up Bird*

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<sup>4</sup> The following reviews point out the realistic nature of *Norwegian Wood*:

Buruma, Ian. "Becoming Japanese." *New Yorker* 72 (1996): 64.

Horvath, Brooke. Rev. of *Norwegian Wood*, by Haruki Murakami. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 229.

Strecher, Matthew. *Dances with Sheep: The Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 2002. 46.

and Kafka clearly resemble each other in their surrealism.

### What Kafka Has That Wind-Up Bird Does Not Have

Although similar, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore* differ greatly in the fact that the latter achieved what the former did not. One achievement of Kafka is that it was the first Murakami work to appear on bestseller lists all over America. In *The San Francisco Chronicle*, for example, not only did the hardcover version of Kafka rank first in the bestselling fiction list two months after its publication, but it remained there for three weeks (“San Francisco Chronicle Best-Sellers”). Moreover, Kafka ranked number six in the hardcover fiction category of the whole United States in a month, according to *Publishers Weekly* (“The Book Sense Lists”). Considering that the worldwide bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code*, ranked second in the same list as Kafka, no one can deny how well Murakami literature is becoming familiar to Americans.

In addition, the authoritative *The New York Times* chose *Kafka on the Shore* as one of “The Ten Best Books of 2005,” another and most remarkable accomplishment of the book. As a matter of fact, *The New York Times* had also included *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* in the “Notable Books of the Year” when it was first published in 1997, but had never considered it as one of the best that year. To be chosen as one of the best books of the year by the prestigious *The New York Times* is what only Kafka could accomplish among all Murakami books published in the United States. Yet, although *Wind-Up Bird* was not chosen as one of

the best of the year, it at least was chosen as one of the notable, and then Kafka was chosen as one of the best. Since *Norwegian Wood* or any other works by Murakami had never done any of these deeds, this fact itself proves that American critics prefer works such as *Kafka on the Shore* or *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* to those like *Norwegian Wood*.

Then, why did *Kafka* succeed that much in the United States when it resembles *Wind-Up Bird*? One reason for this is that Murakami had by then established himself in America. Reviews of Murakami's works before *Kafka* almost always included an introduction of the author, listing his other works to help readers of the reviews remember his name. Reviews of *Kafka on the Shore*, on the other hand, lack an introduction of the author; instead they incorporate phrases such as, "America's favorite Japanese novelist" (Moore T06) or simply say, "Haruki Murakami's latest novel" (Jones 67) without any explanation of the author. Critics do not have to explain anymore what kind of writer Murakami is or what he wrote in the past; they assume that the readers would recognize him just by saying "Haruki Murakami."

As to another reason for *Kafka on the Shore*'s success, one can easily imagine that American readers saw something in *Kafka* that could not be found in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. The reviews of *Kafka* point out two main characteristics of the novel, other than the surrealism found also in *Wind-Up Bird*. One is about the exterior structure of the story. Again, consider the following quote by John Updike:

[...] "*Kafka on the Shore*" has a schematic rigor in its execution. Alternate

chapters relate the stories of two disparate but slowly converging heroes. The odd-numbered chapters serve up the first-person narrative of a fifteen-year-old runaway [...]. The even-numbered chapters trace [...] the life of a mentally defective sexagenarian, Satoru Nakata. (91)

Saying that Kafka “has a schematic rigor,” Updike explains how the book is made up of a strict framework. Indeed, the story of Kafka Tamura as protagonist and Satoru Nakata as protagonist turn about in *Kafka on the Shore*. Murakami himself said in an interview about Kafka that he deliberately built the novel in that structure, simply adopting a technique to write a story (Murakami 12-13). By contrast, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* lacks preciseness in structure, since memories, letters, and newspaper articles appear abruptly through the development of the story. The American public must have felt it easier to read Kafka than *Wind-Up Bird* because of the strict framework peculiar to the former.

Another characteristic that American reviewers found in Kafka concerns the story itself. In the following review, “Murakami takes a gentle bildungsroman, a novel of education, about the quest for love and autonomy [...]” (“Our Editors Recommend” B2), Kafka is explained literally as a bildungsroman, a story in which the protagonist grows up; in this case it seems to refer to the fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura growing up through many experiences. Kafka as bildungsroman and the calculated structure of the novel suggests that so far, *Kafka on the Shore* seems to fit perfectly into familiar framework.

However, reviews point out that even the organized Kafka has its faults. Scott

Blackwood, for example, argues that the novel merely displays a large stock of knowledge:

The digressions about philosophy, art, literature and music might inspire the reader to play a Radiohead song or read Sophocles rather than finish “Kafka.”  
 [...] But most readers will feel that too many of these characters are mere props for metaphysical speculation, rather than genuinely complex personalities. (K5)

In *Kafka on the Shore*, too many literary quotations appear to the point of excess. The characters talk over ancient Greek dramas and Greek philosophy or turn their thoughts toward Beethoven’s life. On the other hand, it seems that all those talks take place just to introduce wisdom, instead of representing the characters’ personalities. The characters are merely used; instead, the weight is on how much knowledge could be packed into the novel. Furthermore, Steven G. Kellman implies another defect of *Kafka*: “A bildungsroman [...], it [*Kafka on the Shore*] proffers wisdom but at least delivers what a character calls ‘a lifetime of weird stuff packed into ten days’” (143). Like Blackwood, Kellman admits that *Kafka* gives us some kind of knowledge: however, nothing more. He merely sees *Kafka* as a novel made up of strange occurrences, which do not place it as a work of importance. Since a few other reviewers say that *Kafka* cannot be considered as a story with deep connotations (Maslin), one can conclude that American scholars think *Kafka* has no further meaning than being a bildungsroman and cannot be called a profound novel.

What *Wind-Up Bird* Has That *Kafka* Does Not Have



In addition to the problem of Kafka on the Shore's defects, interestingly American reviewers do not seem to think Kafka as Murakami's best book, in spite of its reputation in the United States. Since they had not hesitated to praise *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* as a Murakami masterpiece, it suggests that *Wind-Up Bird* must have been superior to Kafka in some sense. What is it that American reviewers saw in *Wind-Up Bird* that they did not in Kafka? The reviews of *Wind-Up Bird* around the time of its publication demonstrate that critics paid attention to the vivid wartime descriptions in the novel:

The new book [*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*] almost self-consciously deals with a wide spectrum of heavy subjects: the transitory nature of romantic love, the evil vacuity of contemporary politics and, most provocative of all, the legacy of Japan's violent aggression in World War II. (James BR8, emphasis added)

In contrast to Kafka, having been referred to as a novel without much meaning, Jamie James explains the problems in *Wind-Up Bird* as "heavy," in other words, meaningful. Especially the underlined part shows how he acknowledges significance in the scenes depicting the Second World War from a Japanese point of view. *Wind-Up Bird* depicts with incredible vividness an event in World War II where a Mongolian peels the entire skin of a Japanese captive that slowly leads him toward his death. Kafka, on the other hand, does not include a shocking description of war. Nakata, one of two protagonists in Kafka, becomes disabled in an accident during the Second World War, and two fugitive soldiers who seem to have died in the same war appear in modern life wearing their uniforms at the time, but Murakami does

not give vivid descriptions of the battle. Unlike Kafka, the impressive wartime descriptions in *Wind-Up Bird* that stick to the minds of readers must have been one reason that raised the novel to its position as a Murakami masterpiece.

Another of *Wind-Up Bird*'s advantages that we can discover through the faults of Kafka is that it does not belong to a particular literary genre:

Murakami's branching, hybrid tale is a love story one minute, a detective story the next, a psychological thriller, a New Age-ish Bildungsroman, a sober chronicle of wartime atrocities, a meditation on historical guilt and more, in dizzying succession. (Ward X08)

While American scholars considered Kafka as a mere Bildungsroman, they had seen *Wind-Up Bird* as a novel that seems to fit into every category but at the same time cannot match a single genre. Considering that they also saw Kafka as a story based on a strict framework, we can say that they had found *Wind-Up Bird* to be a story far more original than Kafka. Kafka must have been easier to understand because of its simple structure and because of the fact that it can fit into a single category of Bildungsroman. In terms of originality, however, *Wind-Up Bird* has the upper hand, and this "originality" of the novel turns out to serve as the other element that makes the book a masterpiece.

What is "Murakamiesque" to Americans

Kafka on the Shore's invasion of the American literary society does not exactly topple The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle's status as a Haruki Murakami masterpiece there. Both have their own charms; Kafka's charms seem to have attracted a great many of the American general public, while those of Wind-Up Bird seem to have rendered it a steadfast position as Murakami's most important work. The advantages of both can be considered as what exactly Americans expect from Murakami literature, that is, what is "Murakamiesque" to Americans.

If the author wants his future works not just to sell well but to be regarded highly, and if Americans still expect the same "Murakamiesque-ness" from his works to come, then Murakami will simply have to incorporate the charms of both Kafka on the Shore and The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle into his new books. First of all, he must write a surreal novel, just like both Kafka and Wind-Up Bird were surreal; he should not write a realistic novel like Norwegian Wood anymore. Second, in adopting the advantage of Kafka, he must consciously write in some kind of framework; then the readers will find the book approachable and consider purchasing it. He should not, however, bother too much with the structure, since the consequence might be that the novel lacks importance. Instead, he should concentrate in providing the novel with significance, including vivid descriptions of battle, for example, like those that appear in Wind-Up Bird. And finally, as it would be sad if the new novel were to belong merely to a single category like Kafka, Murakami must pursue originality unfettered by all literary genres. If he considers all four advantages of Wind-Up

Bird and Kafka—surrealism, structure, meaning, and originality—when writing his novels to come, his literature may continue to be regarded highly in the American literary world.

### Conclusion

This paper considered the reasons why Americans prefer *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore* among other Haruki Murakami works and revealed what is “Murakamiesque” to them. *Wind-Up Bird* and *Kafka* resemble each other in both their length and story; compared to the realistic *Norwegian Wood*, both are surreal novels. Although similar, *Kafka* became a national bestseller in the United States, an accomplishment that *Wind-Up Bird* could never have made. Some Americans, however, felt that even the successful *Kafka* lacked something. Examining what Americans saw in *Wind-Up Bird* that they did not in *Kafka* demonstrated that although *Kafka* seems an approachable novel, *Wind-Up Bird* deserves to be called Murakami’s masterpiece.

Analyzing the reviews of *Wind-Up Bird* and *Kafka* revealed four elements that Americans seem to expect from Murakami: surrealism, structure, meaning, and originality. If the author keeps in mind these elements when writing his future works and if Americans still expect the same “Murakamiesque-ness” from his works to come, Haruki Murakami may keep on invading the American literary society; thus this paper is important in suggesting the methods of how he might continue to succeed in the United States.

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