



# Never Let me Go

By Kazuo Ishiguro

First published in 2005

Genre & subject

Science fiction

Classical fiction

## Synopsis

As a child, Kathy—now thirty-one years old—lived at Hailsham, a private school in the scenic English countryside where the children were sheltered from the outside world, brought up to believe that they were special and that their well-being was crucial not only for themselves but for the society they would eventually enter. Kathy had long ago put this idyllic past behind her, but when two of her Hailsham friends come back into her life, she stops resisting the pull of memory.

And so, as her friendship with Ruth is rekindled, and as the feelings that long ago fueled her adolescent crush on Tommy begin to deepen into love, Kathy recalls their years at Hailsham. She describes happy scenes of boys and girls growing up together, unperturbed—even comforted—by their isolation. But she describes other scenes as well: of discord and misunderstanding that hint at a dark secret behind Hailsham's nurturing facade. With the dawning clarity of hindsight, the three friends are compelled to face the truth about their childhood—and about their lives now.

## Author biography

**Kazuo Ishiguro** OBE, FRSA, FRSL (born 8 November 1954) is a Japanese-born British novelist. He was born in Nagasaki, Japan, and his family moved to England in 1960 when he was 5 years old. Ishiguro obtained his Bachelor's degree from the University of Kent in 1978 and his Master's from the University of East Anglia's creative writing course in 1980. He became a British citizen in 1982.

Ishiguro is one of the most celebrated contemporary fiction authors in the English-speaking world, having received four Man Booker Prize nominations, and winning the 1989 award for his novel *The Remains of the Day*. In 2008, *The Times* ranked Ishiguro 32nd on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945".<sup>[1]</sup>

In 2010, his novel *Never Let Me Go* was adapted to film.

## Discussion starters

- Kathy introduces herself as an experienced carer. She prides herself on knowing how to keep her donors calm, "even before fourth donation" [p. 3]. How long does it take for the meaning of such terms as "donation," "carer," and "completed" to be fully revealed?

- Kathy addresses us directly, with statements like "I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we used to have some form of medical every week" [p. 13], and she thinks that we too might envy her having been at Hailsham [p. 4]. What does Kathy assume about anyone she might be addressing, and why?
- Kathy's narration is the key to the novel's disquieting effect. First person narration establishes a kind of intimacy between narrator and reader. What is it like having direct access to Kathy's mind and feelings? How would the novel be different if narrated from Tommy's point of view, or Ruth's, or Miss Emily's?
- One of the most notable aspects of life at Hailsham is the power of the group. Students watch each other carefully and try on different poses, attitudes, and ways of speaking. Is this behaviour typical of most adolescents, or is there something different about the way the students at Hailsham seek to conform?
- Does the novel examine the possibility of human cloning as a legitimate question for medical ethics, or does it demonstrate that the human costs of cloning are morally repellent, and therefore impossible for science to pursue? What kind of moral and emotional responses does the novel provoke? If you extend the scope of the book's critique, what are its implications for our own society?
- The teacher Lucy Wainright wanted to make the children more aware of the future that awaited them. Miss Emily believed that in hiding the truth, "We were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by sheltering you. . . . Sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you.... But...we gave you your childhoods" [p. 268]. In the context of the story as a whole, is this a valid argument?
- Is it surprising that Miss Emily admits feeling revulsion for the children at Hailsham? Does this indicate that she believes Kathy and Tommy are not fully human? What is the nature of the moral quandary Miss Emily and Madame have gotten themselves into?
- Critic Frank Kermode has noted that "Ishiguro is fundamentally a tragic novelist; there is always a disaster, remote but urgent, imagined but real, at the heart of his stories" [*London Review of Books*, April 21, 2005]. How would you describe the tragedy at the heart of *Never Let Me Go*?
- Some reviewers have expressed surprise that Kathy, Tommy, and their friends never try to escape their ultimate fate. They cling to the possibility of deferral, but never attempt to vanish into the world of freedom that they view from a distance. Yet they love the film *The Great Escape*, "the moment the American jumps over the barbed wire on his bike" [p. 99]. Why might Ishiguro have chosen to present them as fully resigned to their early deaths?

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