

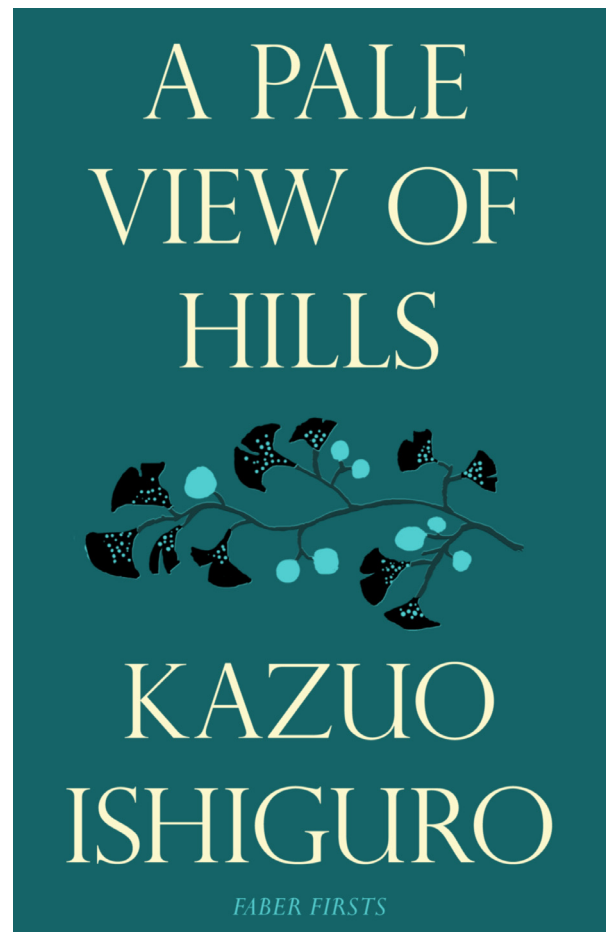
Faber Firsts

## A Pale View of Hills by Kazuo Ishiguro

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### A Pale View of Hills by Kazuo Ishiguro In brief

Etsuko is an aging Japanese woman living alone in rural England. She has her younger daughter Niki to stay for a few days, shortly after the suicide of her elder daughter Keiko. There is an emotional distance between the two, which only seems to grow as Etsuko retreats into her memories, specifically the months when she was living in Nagasaki with her first husband shortly after the end of World War 2. During this time she was pregnant with Keiko and forging an unusual friendship with her neighbour Sachiko. The friendship was initiated by Etsuko as a result of her concern for Sachiko's daughter Mariko: Sachiko seems somewhat absent-minded about her care, and it transpires that she was once a wealthy woman who has been reduced to destitution. As Etsuko retreats further into her memories of this time, it becomes increasingly clear that she may not be an entirely reliable narrator, and the truth might be something she is even capable of navigating any more.





## Background

It is difficult not to read *A Pale View of Hills* without taking into account Ishiguro's biography — born in Nagasaki in 1954, he moved with his family to the UK as a five-year-old, making exactly the transition that Keiko struggled to cope with. The novel reflects on this pivotal period in Japan's history, as it is afforded both the nation and its individuals the opportunity to rebuild and redefine itself.

The central theme of the novel is that of social change: its necessity, its difficulties and its opportunities. While Sachiko is seen as bordering on the deluded with her relentless optimism about what a future away from the 'old' Japan will hold, Etsuko's father-in-law Ogata-San is stuck looking backwards, regretting the changes that he is watching take place in his country. In the middle, Etsuko's husband Jiro is paralysed by doubt, unable to move in either direction. There are however, characters that provide a glimmer of hope: Mrs Fujiwara, who has had almost her entire family destroyed during the war, is thriving in her new role running a noodle shop, and Niki seems to have adapted to Western life with significant ease.

As the novel develops, we see that despite the warmth of Etsuko's relationship with Ogata-San, she eventually moves in the direction that Sachiko advocates. But there can be no doubt that choosing a Western life is not without pain or danger — Keiko herself pays the ultimate price for the move, and the reflective, nostalgic tone of the book reveals Etsuko does feel regrets about her decision.

A thematic pre-occupation for much of Ishiguro's work has been the tension between duty and obligation, versus the desire for freedom and adventure. This is clear here in his debut, particularly in the roles of the women, who are straining against the restrictions of the 'old' Japanese way of living, but struggling to cope with the more modern ones. Sachiko is the most extreme of these — refusing to return to live with her wealthy uncle, rejecting Japanese men for a future abroad with an American, and giving her daughter almost unlimited freedom to find her own way as an individual.

There is also the question of the reliability of the Etsuko as a narrator overshadowing the work. Critics have questioned whether the story of Sachiko and Mariko is in fact that of Etsuko and Keiko, and the narrative as we are told it is just a way of Etsuko putting distance between herself and the truth, and dealing with her guilt. There are others that dispute this. In interview, Ishiguro himself has said "What I intended was this: because it's really Etsuko talking about herself, and possibly that somebody else, Sachiko, existed or did not exist, the meanings that Etsuko imputes to the life of Sachiko are obviously the meanings that are relevant to her [Etsuko's] own life. Whatever the facts were about what happened to Sachiko and her daughter, they are of interest to Etsuko now because she can use them to talk about herself."

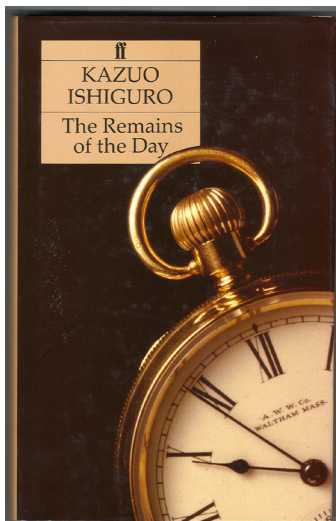
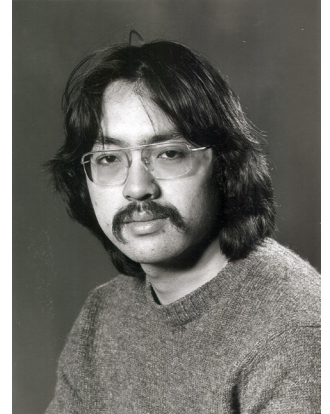
## For discussion

- In the opening paragraph, Etsuko states her desire 'not to be reminded of the past' but then spends much of the book reminiscing. What narrative purpose do you think this initial statement has?
- Sachiko is a very enigmatic character, especially at first. Much of her conversation is very closed, allowing Etsuko little opportunity to extract information from her. What do you think this achieves?
- On p41, Etsuko states that her memory of certain events has 'grown hazy with time'. Do you think that she is telling the 'truth' about her hazy memory or amending details to satisfy her own agenda of working through the guilt about the suicide of Keiko?
- Later, on p52 she tells Niki that she doesn't 'enjoy deceiving people'. Do you think Niki believes her? Do you think the reader is supposed to believe her?
- Some critics have noted that *A Pale View of Hills* makes for a rather slow read. What did you think of the pace? Too sedate, or allowing for plenty of time to study the prose and reflect on the theme?
- Sachiko is very clear that 'life's much better for a woman in America'. Do you think that the novel shows this to be entirely true? What are the arguments for and against this in the text?
- The description we have of Keiko's way of life and her suicide seems very shocking in comparison with the caring, maternal attitude that Etsuko displays towards Mariko. Discuss this contrast and how it might reflect on Etsuko's frame of mind.
- There are not many insights given into Keiko's character. Do you feel you know her well enough to be able to emotionally engage with her death? Or given that we only see her through Etsuko's eyes, do you think that is not important?
- There are many details we are not told: What became of Jiro? Did Sachiko make it to America? How did Etsuko end up in England? Do you find this frustrating or does it simply focus you on the details we are given?
- The description of the woman on p74 that Sachiko tells Etsuko that Mariko has seen is very unsettling. What do you think she represents?
- Mrs Fujiwara has suffered more than the other characters, losing her way of life and almost all of her family in the war. But she is seen as one of the most happy, forward looking characters. What do you think Ishiguro is saying about the development of post-war Japan with this character?
- Ishiguro has said in interview "In some ways I think that nostalgia can be quite a positive emotion. It does allow us to picture a better world. It's kind of an emotional sister of idealism". How do you think this has manifested itself in this novel?
- The story focuses on the tension between those who 'look forward' and those to 'look back'. The novel ends with Niki glancing back at her mother. What do you think the futures holds for these characters?
- Do you think that the stories of Etsuko and Sachiko are in fact one and the same?



## About the author

Born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954, Kazuo Ishiguro has lived in Britain since the age of five. He was educated in Surrey and then the University of Kent, Canterbury, before studying Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia on the post-graduate course run by Malcolm Bradbury. His novels have won him international acclaim and many honours, including the Booker Prize, the Whitbread Book of the Year Award, and OBE for Services to Literature and the French decoration Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. His work has been translated into forty languages, and *The Remains of the Day* was adapted into an award-winning film starring Emma Thompson and Anthony Hopkins.



## Resources

<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth52>

The author's page on the British Council website

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/feb/19/fiction.kazuoishiguro>

Interview published in 2005

## Suggested further reading

### Fiction

Cat's Eye - Margaret Atwood

After Dark – Haruki Murakami

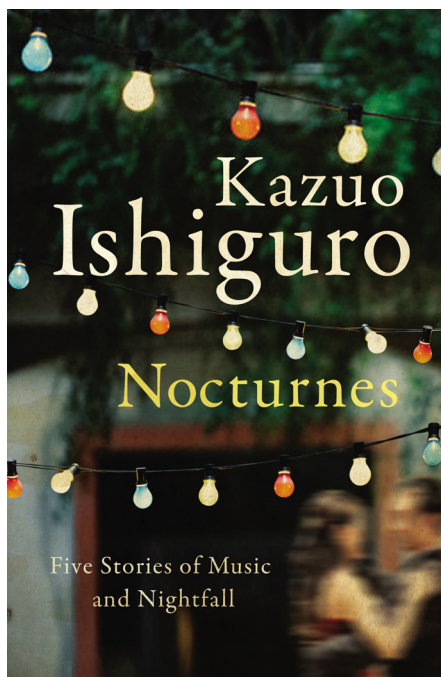
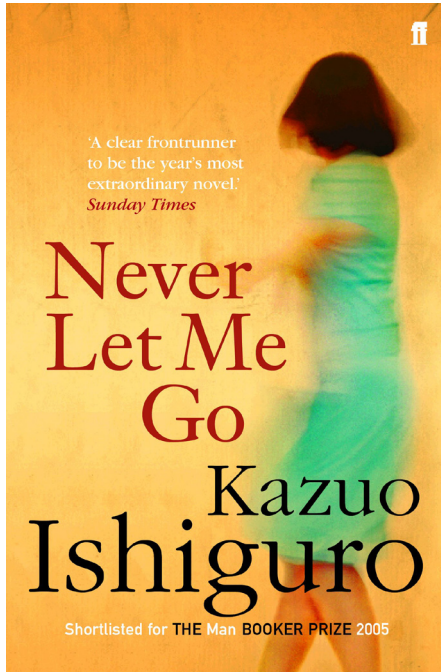
A River Runs Through It - Norman Maclean

White Tiger – Aravind Adiga

### Non-Fiction

Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro (Literary Conversations Series) - Brian W. Shaffer (Ed), Cynthia F. Wong (Ed)





## Other books by Kazuo Ishiguro

### Fiction

An Artist of the Floating World (1986)  
The Remains of the Day (1989)  
The Unconsoled (1985)  
When We Were Orphans (2000)  
Never Let Me Go (2005)

### Short Fiction

Three short stories in Introduction 7: Stories by New Writers (1981): 'A Strange and Sometimes Sadness', 'Waiting for J' and 'Getting Poisoned'  
Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall (2009)

### Screenplays

A Profile of Arthur J. Mason (Original Screenplay for Channel 4) (1984)  
The Gourmet (Original Screenplay for the BBC; the script was later published in Granta 43) (1987)  
The Saddest Music in the World (Original Screenplay) (2003)  
The White Countess (Original Screenplay) (2005)

