

WHERE MY CHARACTERS COME FROM

I don't choose them; they choose me.

By Haruki Murakami

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I'M OFTEN ASKED if any characters in my novels are based on real people. On the whole, the answer is no. I've written a lot of novels, but only two or three times have I intentionally, from the start, had a real person in mind when I created a character (in each case a secondary one). When I did, I was a bit nervous that a reader might detect that the character was modeled on somebody—especially if the person who did was the one the character was based on. But fortunately no one has ever caught me out, not even once. I might model a character on a real person, but I always carefully and diligently rework the character so people won't recognize the original. Probably the person himself doesn't either.

What happens more often is that people claim that the characters I have totally made up are based on real people. In some cases, people even swear that a certain character is based on them. Somerset Maugham was threatened with a lawsuit by a government official he'd never met, and never even heard of, who claimed that one of Maugham's characters was based on him. Maugham depicted an adulterous affair, which made the official feel his reputation was at risk.

Most of the time, the characters who appear in my novels naturally emerge from the flow of the story. I almost never decide in advance that I'll present a particular type of character. As I write, a kind of axis forms that makes possible the appearance of certain characters, and I go ahead and fit one detail after another into place, like iron scraps attaching to a magnet. And in this way an overall picture of a person materializes.

Afterward I often think that certain details resemble those of a real person, but most of the process happens automatically. I think I almost unconsciously pull information and various fragments from the cabinets in my brain and then weave them together.

→ just like how you write your short story in English 9!

I have my own name for this process: the Automatic Dwarfs. I've nearly always driven stick-shift cars, and the first time I drove an automatic, I had the feeling that dwarfs must be living inside the gearbox, each in charge of operating a separate gear. I also felt faintly anxious that someday those dwarfs, deciding they'd had enough of slaving away for someone else, would go on strike, and my car would suddenly stop working in the middle of the highway.

I know you'll laugh to hear me say this about the process of creating characters, but it's as if those Automatic Dwarfs living in my unconscious are, despite a bit of grumbling, somehow managing to work hard. All I do is diligently copy it down. Naturally, what I write isn't neatly organized, a ready-to-go novel, so later I rework it a number of times, changing its form. That rewriting is more conscious and logical. But the creation of the prototype is an unconscious and intuitive process. There's no choice involved, really. I have to do it like this, or my characters will turn out unnatural and dead. That's why, in the beginning stage of the process, I leave everything up to the Automatic Dwarfs.

Still, in the same way that you have to read a lot of books in order to write novels, to write about people you need to know a lot of them. By "know," I don't mean you have to really understand them deep down. All you need to do is glance at people's appearance, notice how they talk and act, what their special characteristics are. People you like; ones you're not so fond of; ones who, frankly, you dislike—it's important to observe people, as much as possible, without choosing whom to watch. What I mean is, if the only people you put in your novels are the kind you like, are interested in, or can easily understand, then your novels will ultimately lack a certain expansiveness. You want all sorts of different

people, doing all sorts of different actions, and **it's through that clash of differences that things get moving, propelling the story forward.** So you shouldn't just avert your eyes when you decide you can't stomach somebody; instead, ask yourself, "What is it I don't like about them?" and "Why don't I like that?"

A long time ago—I think I was in my mid-30s—someone told me, **"There are never any bad people in your novels."** (Later I learned that Kurt Vonnegut was told the same thing by his father just before his father died.) I could see the point. Ever since then, I've consciously tried to include more negative characters, but at that stage, I was more inclined to create a private world—one that was harmonious—than to write large-scale, narrative-driven books. **I had to build my own neat little realm as a shelter from the harsh realities of the larger world around me.**

But as time has passed and I've matured (you might say) as a person and as a writer, **I've ever so gradually been able to include more negative characters in the stories I write, characters who introduce an element of discord.** As the novelistic world I created took clearer shape and functioned fairly well, my next step was to make this world broader and deeper, and more dynamic than before. Doing that meant adding more variety to my characters and extending the scope of their actions. I keenly felt the need to do this.

One of the things I most enjoy about writing novels is the sense that I can become anybody I want to be.

By then, I'd experienced many things in my life, too. At age 30 I became a professional writer, with a public presence, and like it or not I had to face a lot of pressure. I don't naturally gravitate to the spotlight, but there were times when, reluctantly, I was forced to put myself there. Sometimes I had to do things that I didn't want to do, or was very disappointed when a person I was close to spoke out against me. Some people would praise me with words they didn't really feel, while others—pointlessly, as far as I could see—heaped ridicule on me. Still others

spoke half-truths about me. I also went through experiences that I can only characterize as out of the ordinary.

Every time, I tried to observe in detail the way that the people involved looked and how they spoke and acted. *If I'm going to have to go through all this*, I figured, *I should at least get something useful out of it* (to get back what I put into it, you could say). Naturally, these experiences hurt me, even made me depressed sometimes, but now I feel they provided a lot of nourishment for me as a novelist. Of course, *I had plenty of wonderful, enjoyable experiences* as well, but for whatever reason, *it's the unpleasant memories that remain, the ones I don't want to remember. Perhaps there's more to learn from them.*

When I think about the novels I enjoy most, I realize that they have lots of fascinating supporting characters. The one that leaps to mind is Dostoyevsky's *Demons*. The novel is long but holds my interest to the end. One colorful, weird minor character after another appears, keeping me wondering, *Why this kind of person?* Dostoyevsky must have had a huge mental cabinet to work with.

The novels of Natsume Sōseki are also full of appealing characters. Even those who appear only briefly are vividly portrayed and unique. A line they utter, or an expression or action of theirs, will strangely linger in my mind. What impresses me about Sōseki's fiction is that it contains hardly any makeshift characters, ones who are there because the author decided he needed that sort of person at that point. These are novels created not by the mind but rather through sensations and experience. Sōseki paid his dues in each and every line, and you feel a sort of peace as you read them.

*ONE OF THE THINGS I most enjoy about writing novels is the sense that I can become anybody I want to be. I started off writing novels in the first person, using the first-person male pronoun *boku*, and continued in the same vein for some 20 years, only occasionally writing short*

stories in the third person. Naturally this “I” didn’t equal me, Haruki Murakami (just as Philip Marlowe isn’t Raymond Chandler), and in each novel the image of the first-person male protagonist changes. **But as I kept writing in the first person, the line between real-life me and my novels’ protagonists inevitably blurred to a certain extent, both for me and for the reader.**

This wasn’t a problem at first, because creating and broadening a novelistic world by using a fictionalized version of “I” was my original aim, but over time I got the sense that I needed more. Especially as my novels grew longer, using only the first-person narrative felt confining and stifling. In *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985), I used two versions of “I” (using the pronouns *boku* and the more formal *watashi*, in alternating chapters), **which I think was an attempt to break through the functional limits of first-person narration.**

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle (published in Japan in three volumes in 1994 and 1995) was the last novel I wrote solely in the first person, until *Killing Commendatore* two decades later. **Throughout that earlier, very long novel, I couldn’t make do with just the “I” viewpoint, so I introduced a number of narrative techniques, such as other people’s stories and long letters.** Even with all of that, though, I felt I couldn’t take first-person narration any further—so in my novel *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), the chapters about the boy Kafka were written in the usual “I,” but the remaining chapters were in the third person. Sort of a compromise, you might say, but even just introducing the third-person voice in half the book opened up **my novelistic world considerably. I felt, on a technical level, much freer than when I wrote *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.**

The short-story collection *Tokyo Kitanshu* (2005) and the medium-length novel *After Dark* (2004) **were almost exclusively in the third person. It was as though I was making sure in these formats that I could do a solid job in this new narrative mode—like taking a sports car you just bought**

out for a spin on a mountain road to see what it can do. Two decades after my debut, I was ready to move on from the first person.

Why did it take so long to change the voice I wrote in? Even I don't know the exact reason. I can say that my body and psyche had grown completely used to the process of writing novels with an "I" narrator, so it took some time to make the switch. For me it was not simply a departure from first-person narrative but close to a fundamental transformation in my standpoint as a writer. And I'm the type of person who needs time to change the way I do things. For years I couldn't give actual names to my characters. Nicknames like "the Rat" or "J" were fine, but I basically used characters without names, and wrote in first person. Why couldn't I give them actual names? I don't know the answer. All I can say is that I felt embarrassed about assigning people names. I felt that somebody like me endowing others (even characters I made up) with names seemed kind of phony. Maybe in the beginning I felt embarrassed, too, by the whole act of writing novels. It was like laying my naked heart out for everyone to see.

I was finally able to give the main characters names starting with the novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987). Until then, I'd imposed a pretty restricted, roundabout system on myself, but at the time it didn't bother me much. I just thought, *That's how it is*. But as my novels became longer and more complex, I started to feel the inconvenience. If you have a lot of characters and they don't have names, it can cause all kinds of confusion. So I resigned myself to it and made the decision, as I was writing *Norwegian Wood*, that I would name the characters. I closed my eyes and steeled myself, and after that, giving my characters names wasn't all that hard. Nowadays I'm able to easily come up with them. *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (2013) even has a character's name in the title. With *1Q84* (2009-10), the story really started to take off when I came up with the name Aomame for the female protagonist. In that sense, names have become an important element in my writing.

→ kind of paradoxical, self-contradictory
↳ before, he said he let the Automatic Dwarfs take over

EVERY TIME I write a new novel, I tell myself, *Okay, here is what I'm going to try to accomplish*, and I set concrete goals for myself—for the most part visible, technical types of goals. I enjoy writing like that. As I clear a new hurdle and accomplish something different, I get a real sense that I've grown, even if only a little, as a writer. It's like climbing, step-by-step, up a ladder. The wonderful thing about being a novelist is that even in your 50s and 60s, that kind of growth and innovation is possible. There's no age limit. The same wouldn't hold true for an athlete.

→ simile

As I began using third person, increasing the number of characters, and giving them names, the possibilities for my novels widened. I could include all types and shades of people with all sorts of opinions and worldviews, and depict the diverse intertwining among them. And what's most wonderful of all is that I can become practically anyone I want. Even when I was writing in the first person I had that feeling, but with the third person the choices are far greater.

→ character diversity

When I write in the first person, I usually take the protagonist (or narrator) as myself in a broad sense. This isn't the real me, as I've said, but change the situation and circumstances and it might be. By branching out, I am able to divide myself. And by dividing myself and throwing myself into the narrative, I am able to verify who I am, and identify the point of contact between myself and others, or between myself and the world. In the beginning that way of writing really suited me. And most of the novels I loved were also written in the first person.

Characters who are—in a literary sense—alive will eventually break free of the writer's control and begin to act independently.

For instance, *The Great Gatsby*: The hero of the novel is Jay Gatsby, but the first-person narrator is the young man Nick Carraway. Through the subtle interplay between Nick and Gatsby, and through dramatic developments in the story, Fitzgerald is actually narrating the truth about himself. That perspective lends depth to the story. However, the fact that the story is narrated from Nick's viewpoint imposes certain constraints

→ similar to how Wilde uses Algernon to narrate his own life

→ postmodernism in a nutshell

→ disadvantages of telling a story through only one perspective

on the novel. It's difficult for the story to reflect things that happen beyond where Nick can perceive them. Fitzgerald mobilized other novelistic techniques, fascinating in and of themselves, to skillfully overcome those limitations. But even those technical devices have their own limitations. And in fact, Fitzgerald never again wrote a novel structured like *The Great Gatsby*.

J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, too, is very artfully written, an outstanding first-person novel, but he likewise never wrote another novel in this style. My guess is that both authors were afraid that the constraints of that structure might mean they'd wind up writing essentially the same novel all over again. And I think their decision was probably the correct one.

essentially Aestheticism, hard to criticize yourself if you make the art out of art

→ both basing on their own life stories, therefore same novel essentially

With series, like Raymond Chandler's Marlowe novels, the narrowness of these limitations can be employed to—conversely—lend a kind of intimate predictability (my early "Rat" stories perhaps had a touch of this). But with many stand-alone novels, the restrictive wall that the first-person narration constructs can stifle the writer. Which is exactly why I tried, from many angles, to shake up that narrative mode in order to carve out new territory.

When, in *Kafka on the Shore*, I introduced third-person narrative in half of the story, I found a real relief in writing the story that paralleled Kafka's, about the odd old man Nakata and Hoshino, the somewhat uncouth young truck driver. In writing this section, I was dividing myself in a new way so that I could project myself onto others—more precisely, so that I could entrust others with my divided self. And as a result, the narrative could intricately divide and open out in all sorts of directions.

I can hear people saying, "If that's true, then you should have switched to third person long ago—then you would have improved much faster," but I couldn't work things out that simply. Personality-wise I'm not that adaptable, and changing my novelistic standpoint involved making a

→ shows that Murakami is inflexible

major structural change in my work. To support this transformation, I needed to acquire some solid novelistic techniques and fundamental physical stamina, which is why I made the shift gradually, in stages, seeing how it went. At any rate, by the early 2000s, when I'd mastered a new vehicle and could step into uncharted territory in my novels, I felt liberated, as if a wall that had been there had suddenly disappeared.

An interesting story needs:
→ dynamic, round characters

THE NOVELIST has to put characters in his novel who feel real and are compelling and speak and act in ways that are a bit unpredictable. A novel with characters who only say and do predictable things isn't going to attract many readers. Naturally there will be people who feel that novels in which ordinary characters do ordinary things are the really outstanding ones, but (and this is, after all, just my personal preference) I can't get interested in those kinds of books.

(not) static, flat, dull.

Beyond being real, compelling, and somewhat unpredictable, I think what's even more important is how far a novel's characters advance the story. Of course, the writer creates the characters, but characters who are—in a literary sense—alive will eventually break free of the writer's control and begin to act independently. I'm not the only fiction writer who feels this way. In fact, unless that occurs, writing the novel becomes a strained and painful process. When a novel is on the right track, the characters take on a life of their own, the story moves forward by itself, and the novelist ends up in a very happy situation, just writing down what he sees happening in front of him. And sometimes a character takes the novelist by the hand, leading the way to an unexpected destination. → sums up Postmodernism

I'll cite an example from a novel that I assumed would be only about 60 pages long in Japanese manuscript format—*Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, which features a character named Sara Kimoto. To sum up the story line, Tsukuru Tazaki, the main character, had four really good friends from high school in Nagoya who suddenly told him they didn't want to see or hear from him ever again. They didn't give a

reason. He completed college in Tokyo, got a job at a railway company, and is 36 in the present time of the story. His best friends cutting him off has left him deeply wounded. But he hides this pain and lives a peaceful, everyday life. His work goes well, he gets along with the people around him, and he's had several girlfriends along the way, though he hasn't formed deep attachments to any of them. At this point he meets Sara, who is two years older than he is, and they start seeing each other.

On a whim he tells Sara about his four high-school friends. Sara ponders this, then says he has to go back to Nagoya to find out what happened 16 years earlier to cause this rift: "Not to see what you want to see, but what you *must* see." → OPPOSITE OF AESTHETICISM

To be honest, until she said that, the idea that Tsukuru needed to go back to see his four friends was the furthest thought from my mind. I'd been planning to write a fairly short story in which Tsukuru lives a quiet, mysterious life, never knowing why he'd been rejected. But once she said that (and I merely wrote down what she said to him), I had to make Tsukuru go to Nagoya and, in the end, send him all the way to Finland. And I needed to then explore those four characters, Tsukuru's former friends, all over again to show what sort of people they were. And give details of the lives they'd led up to that point.

Summary
of
Colorless
Tsukuru
Tazaki
and His
Years of
Pilgrimage

In almost an instant, the words that Sara spoke totally changed the story's direction, nature, scope, and structure. This was a complete surprise to me. If you think about it, she wasn't saying that to the protagonist, so much as to me. "You have to write more about this," she was saying. "You've stepped into that realm, and you've acquired enough strength to do that." So Sara was, again, perhaps a reflection of my alter ego, one aspect of my consciousness telling me not to stop at the place where I'd intended. In that sense, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* holds no small significance for me. On a formal level, it's a realistic novel, yet I find that all sorts of intricate, metaphorical things are going on below the surface. → Postmodernism summed up

The characters in my novels urge me—the writer—to forge ahead. I felt this keenly when I was writing the words and actions of Aomame in 1Q84. It was as if she were forcibly enlarging something inside me. Looking back, I'm struck that most of the time it's female characters, not male characters, who lead me and spur me on. Why that is, I have no idea.

→ Postmodernism

What I want to say is that while the novelist is creating a novel, he is simultaneously being created by the novel.

I'M SOMETIMES ASKED, "Why don't you write novels with characters the same age as you?" I'm well beyond middle age now, so the question really is, *Why don't you write about the lives of older people?* But one thing I don't understand is why it is necessary that a writer write about people his own age. Why is that a natural job? As I said before, one of the things I enjoy most about writing novels is being able to become anyone I want. Why should I give up such a wonderful right?

↳ Murakami wants to become a character in the story he is writing

!!

When I wrote *Kafka on the Shore*, I was a little past 50, yet I made the main character a 15-year-old boy. And all the time I was writing, I felt like I was a 15-year-old. Of course these weren't the feelings a present-day 15-year-old boy would have. Instead, I transferred the feelings I had back when I was 15 into a fictional "present." Still, as I wrote the novel, I was able to vividly relive, almost in their original form, the air I actually breathed at age 15, the light I actually saw. Through the power of writing, I could draw out sensations and feelings that had long lain hidden deep within. It was a truly wonderful experience. Perhaps the sort of sensation only a novelist can taste.

Perfect summary of Postmodernism

→ Why does he write then?

But just me enjoying this by myself will not create a literary work. It has to be put into a form that lets readers share the pleasure. Which is why I included the character Nakata, who is in his 60s. Nakata was in a sense my alter ego, a projection of me. And with Kafka and Nakata acting in parallel and in response to each other, the novel acquired a healthy

→ Ahh

balance. At least I felt that way as I was writing—and I feel that way even now.

Maybe someday I will write a novel with a protagonist my own age, but at this point I don't feel it's absolutely necessary. What pops up first for me is the idea for a novel. Then the story naturally, spontaneously reaches out from the idea. As I said in the beginning, it's the story itself that decides what sort of characters will appear. As the writer, I merely follow directions as a faithful scribe.

key point of the article

I might, at one time, become a 20-year-old lesbian. Another time I'll be a 30-year-old unemployed househusband. I put my feet into the shoes I'm given, make my feet fit those shoes, and then start to act. That's all it is. I don't make the shoes fit my feet. This is not something you can do in reality, but if you toil for years as a novelist, you'll find you're able to accomplish it because the enterprise is imaginary. And being imaginary, it's like things that take place in dreams. In dreams—whether ones you have while asleep or ones you have while awake—you have hardly any choice about what happens. Basically I go with the flow. And as long as I'm following that flow, I can freely do all sorts of things that are hardly possible. This is indeed one of the main joys of writing novels.

metaphorical way of representing Postmodernism and narratives

!!
follow your "gut" in writing - start with an image

story about adapting oneself in literature (where you can do anything you wish)

That's how I want to reply every time I'm asked, "Why don't you write novels with characters the same age as you?" But the explanation is too long, and I doubt people would easily get it, so I always give a suitably vague answer. I smile and say something like, "Good question. Maybe someday I'll do just that." And the truth is, it's extremely difficult to observe yourself, objectively and accurately, as you are now. Maybe that's precisely why I wear all kinds of shoes that aren't mine. Doing that, I'm able to discover myself in a more comprehensive way, much like triangulating a location.

There still seems so much I need to learn about the characters in my novels. At the same time, there seems to be so much I need to

learn *from* the characters in my novels. In the future, I want my fiction to bring to life all kinds of weird and colorful characters. Whenever I begin writing a new novel, I get excited, wondering what kinds of people I'm going to meet next.

Tips from this article:

- Follow your "gut" - start with an image
- observe, don't judge
- Names are used sparingly
- Feel the words you write

