

INTERVIEW with Murakami Haruki

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Murakami Haruki said he would not read any novels again that he has already completed. From <Norwegian Wood>, which has sold more than 6 million copies worldwide, to <Kafka on the Shore>, which he put all of his energy into, the stories became part of the past as he dotted the period of his last sentence. What is important to Haruki is the next sentence, next story.

But, we wanted to know everything about him-his past, present, and future.

Quiet voice, loose jeans, a faded round-neck T-shirt, running, a cat, TV series, <LOST>, Billie Holiday, and writing, of course, were some of words that came about after meeting Haruki in Hawaii.

Photographs by Mark Arbeit
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October 17, 2006, 3:30 p.m., in a small office at the University of Hawaii, the door was wide open and I could see his sharp profile. Murakami Haruki was sitting in the middle of the room- on an old, small wooden chair that could have been part of a Van Gogh painting. He was sitting on the edge of the chair, with his two legs resting on top of yet another chair that was about a meter apart, and turned his head to acknowledge the sudden presence of a visitor. His face was expressionless; in his left hand, he held a small English paperback book. Two walls of the study were filled with books and a bicycle stood next to the desk. It was exactly 28 days since Murakami Haruki accepted the interview through email on Sept. 19.

All of Hawaii was very shaky yesterday. You must have been surprised by the earthquake.

-Earthquakes occur in Japan, but I was not expecting any in Hawaii, so I was surprised.

You must have experienced a lot of earthquakes since you grew up in Kobe.

-Actually the time I was living in Kobe, there weren't many earthquakes. Even in Kobe, which is famous for earthquakes, I didn't experience many earthquakes. I was in the middle of writing when Hawaii started shaking. I wondered "what in the world is going on?"

Mr. Murakami, Haruki, Murakami-san, Haruki-san...which name do you prefer?

-Any one is fine, but most people in Japan call me Haruki-san. As you may well know, there is another famous Murakami (Ryu) in Japan besides me.

Then I would call you Haruki-san as well. What brought you to Hawaii and when did you come?

-I arrived in August upon being invited by the University of Hawaii. I do not have to teach a course, but I think I will give several lectures. Until now I've attended some literature-related classes as an invited speaker and I've had students ask the most creative and queer questions. I plan to stay in Hawaii until next summer and then return to Japan.

This isn't your first trip to Hawaii, is it? Seeing how Hawaii was depicted in <Dance, Dance, Dance> I assumed you had been here. Describing something in such detail and precision would have been impossible unless you experienced it yourself.

-The first time I came must have been about 20 years ago. I've come here often after that and have a few friends here as well. However, this is the first time I've spent this much time in Oahu. Of all the Hawaiian islands, I love Kauai the best. I love it so much that I bought a house there. It is quiet and peaceful, and I can concentrate well no matter what I am writing. So three or four years ago, I stayed in Kauai for two to three months, where I wrote half of <Kafka on the Shore>. I wrote for three months in Kauai and the remaining three months in Tokyo.

What plans do you have while you are staying in Hawaii? Would it be writing books?

-Yes, writing a good story.

Do you have a plot in mind?

-For now, I am taking some rest and thinking of starting my next novel some time in December, but I don't have any specific plot in mind. I always start my novels from a clean slate. If I decide on what I am going to write about, it becomes a burden. What I need is one first scene. But that scene must be very detailed, alive, and definite. I don't fix the characters or the plot, but if I have a clear first scene, I gain confidence that I can finish it well.

Then did you start writing <The Wind-up Bird Chronicle> only with the first scene of the man cooking spaghetti?

-Yes. At the time, there was only one image in my head, which was of the man cooking spaghetti. I myself didn't know what was going to happen next. I just start from there. Let me put it this way. I draw a point somewhere far away and run toward the point. I don't know what is going to happen while I'm running. The reason a well-written book is fun is because you don't know how it will end. It's the same with me. I don't know what is going to happen next, so I am curious, and since I am curious, it is exciting and since I am excited I continue to write.

The characters in your novels all have very distinct personalities. How do you create such unique characters without having a story or an ending?

-I don't create characters. Instead, I like observing people. I kind of have a set of "character drawers" in my head where I keep detailed images obtained from observations of people. People are mysterious. They become more fascinating the more you observe them. If only I could, I want to follow them home and watch them- see what books they read, what clothes they wear and whom they talk to and how. When one character is complete, I stack them in the drawers in my head and open them up and use them whenever I need them. When I need a character while I'm writing, I know

which drawer I have to open.

I always have thought you are very unique in many ways. What do you think, Haruki San, how are you different?

-I personally consider myself a common man with uncommon abilities. When I am sitting at my desk and writing, I think I'm special, but when I'm not writing- like sitting face to face now and talking- I am utterly common.

Even though you feel like you are not special in many ways, I'm sure you don't seem common at all to your readers. They revere not only your novels but also your lifestyle- jazz, American hardboiled novels, cats, movies, and even the food that you love. How do you feel about the phenomenon of the cultural icons in your novels being commercialized?

-I often hear those things and frankly, I'm not very interested. Once I am finished with a novel, I completely forget about it. The peripheral things no longer have a direct relationship with me any more. I merely enjoy writing. If people enjoy my writing, that's good, if they don't, they don't. Moreover, I never once wanted to become such a famous writer. I like my days to be quiet and peaceful. I like writing books and I like writing novels, but it wasn't my wish to become a famous novelist. I want to walk the city freely without having people recognize me. That's why my rule is not to do things that will promote my face, especially going on TV.

Then, do people not recognize you even when you're walking around places like Shinjuku or Harajuku?

-Yes! Thanks to my continuous efforts so far, I can walk in the center of Tokyo and not be recognized by many people.

What about newspapers? Don't Japanese newspapers like to create ground for discussions or disputes by pitting novelists against feminists or politicians for example?

-That's true, but you just have to turn your head and say you won't participate in any discussion. I am an independent individual and don't want to belong to any group or society. I don't like literary society either. I don't make writer friends. My friends are all ordinary people. I prefer talking about music or cats over heated critiques or unsheathed discussions. I am not a social person, nor am I friendly to everyone. The world I live in is a very limited space. After careful consideration, I choose the people that I want by my side and give my best only to them.

Among novelists, there are many that set a definite political or social path and raise their voices. What are you like?

-In the course of interviews, many people ask me my political views. I usually don't respond to those questions. Of course, as an individual living in modern society, I have opinions and stances in my own way but I don't want to make them public. There are people who have the ability to speak magnificently, but I am not like that. Instead, I write stories. A storyteller isn't a person who reveals his or her views, but a person that writes a story that evokes approval.

In an essay that you wrote in your 30s, you said that the age of 40 is a turning point in

life that has a very important meaning, and that you wanted to create a piece of work that would make you say that you could ‘never write this type of novel again.’

-I remember. <Norwegian Wood> was probably that kind of book, since I wrote it when I was about 38.

<Norwegian Wood> played a huge role in your popularity in Korea, which was unprecedented for a Japanese writer. An innocent-looking girl reading that book appeared in a cell phone ad, and a writing style that is known as the “Haruki style” was also very trendy. If there were no <Norwegian Wood>, would you be where you are today?

-It is the same in Japan. The book sold 2 million copies. <Norwegian Wood> played a big role in promoting my name outside of Japan. In that sense, <Norwegian Wood> is a book that served as a kind of stepping stone in my career.

<Norwegian Wood> still invokes continuing discussions on its literary merit as it is the most well-read book among your novels. In particular, there are many who criticize that the unique sex scene, never found in earlier Japanese novels, was merely a setting to stimulate readers’ curiosity.

-It is interesting that before I wrote the novel, critics viciously attacked me, saying that my books do not contain any descriptions of sex or death. So when I was writing this, I thought, fine, I’ll deal with proper descriptions of sex and death. It was a challenge.

Whenever you write a novel, do you set such tasks or goals?

-Yes, it is the same regardless of what novel I’m writing. In <The Wind-up Bird Chronicle> I describe skinning (peeling the skin of a human being). I received many complaints from readers about this. They said, “Why, why why! Haruki-san, why did you describe such a disgusting scene?” My goal was the same at that time. It was a challenge to write a graphic description of something cruel and violent - kind of a task I gave myself. It’s the same as exercising. This month, the goal is to work out the right arm muscle, next month, it’s the thigh, and the next the shoulder..., something like that.

When I think of the sex scenes in <South of the Border, West of the Sun> or <After Dark> it seems as if you have mastered the art of describing sex scenes.

-Haha, is that so? Many readers think that I very much enjoy using those descriptions, but actually it isn’t. When I write those things, it is very embarrassing and uncomfortable. However, every time I tell myself, “Haruki, this is your work! You should keep going!”

Did you have any “feeling” that <Norwegian Wood> would become this big?

-No. I had no idea. At first, I was thinking of writing a short story, but as I wrote, it kept on getting longer and in that way it became a bestseller of its own accord. As the story developed, the characters came alive and moved- Midori in her way and Watanabe in his. They had their own intentions and will, so I could not stop in the middle.

Are there many things about 20-year old Watanabe and 20-year old you that overlap?

-I don’t think so. First of all, I didn’t have as many women around me as Watanabe did. However, there were similarities. I was also shy, struggling to seek the truth, and so on.

After writing a bestseller that sold more than 6 million copies worldwide, what did you earn and what did you lose?

-Well, <Norwegian Wood> was definitely a well-written novel, and it is nice to know that a lot of people love that story. People all like love stories. I'm no different. However, because <Norwegian Wood> actually isn't my style of literature, from some point on, I began to worry that people may think that this is my representative work. In fact, it's not. <Norwegian Wood> is a type of realism novel but I don't think I'm a realism writer. To me, <Norwegian Wood> was a challenge. I wanted to prove to myself that I could write realism novels too. That was it.

Then which novel would say is Haruki-style literature?

-Works like <Kafka on the Shore> and <The Wind-up Bird Chronicle> that pursue post-modernism.

Those novels stand on the opposite side of realism that most people like. What are you trying to seek through them?

-I want to guide my readers to a world of imagination. I wish they could feel the surreal world that I present as part of reality. I believe that that surreal world exists in the hearts of every person although they can't see in their everyday life. I wish people could look at that surreal world through my books and enjoy it.

Of the 80 books that you've published, about 50 are introduced in Korea- most of your major works excluding translated works. On most of the books, the introduction for Haruki-san on the author's introduction page is written in large letters: "a global writer that draws upon images of isolated human beings in modern society in a serene tone." Do you think this explanation is correct?

-If they say so, it's correct (laughs).

If you were to write the author's introduction yourself, how would you express it?

-Um..I only want to write about one thing: People. I call them "my people." I like writing things about the people around me. About common people- how they were born, how they die, how they love.

How about, "Murakami Haruki, a global writer that writes about people"?

-Haha, that's sounds good. By the way, did I really write 80 books?

You didn't know?

-I really didn't. I'm not interested in novels that are already complete. From long pieces that took more than two years to short stories that I finished in five days, I don't read them again. When they are published, I forget them. The sentences, the characters, the story...everything, I want to forget them and write something new. Sometimes I meet people who tell me that they liked a certain part of my old works, and then I say, "Ah, is that so?" but in fact, most of the time, I feel sorry because I really can't remember.

If someone wants to know you and your work in a limited time, which one would you recommend?

-Hmm, that is a difficult question. I've been writing for 27 years. That is a long time, and the characteristics of the works are different depending on the timeframe. You can divide them into blocks- the first ten years, the next ten years, and so on. If you insist, I'd say <Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World> <Norwegian Wood> <The Wind-up Bird Chronicle> <Kafka on the Shore> because those are the ones I've put the most energy into. I've never reread any of them but I remember every nook and cranny of these works even now. I put a lot of effort into them. It usually takes me five days to a week to finish a short story so perhaps that is why they don't last long in my memory.

I'm not sure if you remember, but was <Hear the Wind Sing> really your first novel?

-Yes. That was truly my first novel.

Who was your first reader?

-My wife, although she says she doesn't remember (laughs). Still, I always seek the opinion of one person, my wife, before publishing a book. She is a very sharp critic. She knows how to read and gives me a lot of good advice.

What works did she like best?

-<After Dark> and <South of the Border, West of the Sun>.

Even though <South of the Border, West of the Sun> dealt with adultery?

-I don't know why but she liked it a lot. And for several days afterwards she was very nice to me..., cooked lots of tasty things that I like.

Your first reader is still the same but many things have changed. How has the Haruki-san who wrote his debut story in 1974 different from the current you of 2006?

-Compared to then, I think I've become a slightly better storyteller now. Back then, there were many things that I thought I wouldn't be able to write about. This because of this and that because of that and so on. Sex scenes, violent scenes, I ran away from them. But now, I have the confidence to be able to write about anything. It is a happy thing.

Among your works, which one took you the most pains?

-Thankfully, I have strong concentrating skills, so I don't take much trouble to write, but the most difficult, I think, was <The Wind-up Bird Chronicle>. First of all, I was personally very busy at the time. I was teaching at a university (Haruki was teaching as an associate researcher at Princeton University in 1991 and visiting fellow at Tufts University in 1993) and busy preparing for classes. The novel itself was also a factor. I mentioned that every novel has a goal. <The Wind-up Bird Chronicle>, in particular, had several goals.

You must have had to train your arm muscles, shoulders, and stomach muscles.

-That's right. Making them all firm took three years.

Are you satisfied in the results?

-Yes, for the most part since it has become a book considered a representative of my works.

Since your muscles were firm, did you save time in editing(revising)?

-Um...not really. The draft of <Kafka on the Shore> took six months, but polishing it took a year. From the first page to last I revised it and revised it again five or six times. If I spend six months writing the draft, I usually spend 10 months editing it.

The royalties must have changed! Have you become rich with higher royalties?

-You're talking about money, right? They've gone up quite a bit. You may not believe me, but I don't have any desire for money. All I need are these plain clothes, a bicycle, and a simple watch. I don't like things that are expensive without reason and I don't need them either.

Then what do you do with all that money?

-Freedom. I buy freedom and I buy my time. That is the most expensive. Thanks to the royalties, I don't need to earn money. I've obtained freedom and I am able to do nothing but writing. To me, freedom is most important.

Along with freedom, I imagine you must have received a lot of stress as well. Becoming a bestselling writer, and writing a novel that is easy to read are good things, but isn't it stressful? People believe that literature should be more complex and harder to read. What do you think about this bias?

-Biases are just biases. I try to use easy words as possible, and make a good story with a simple sentence. Think of what it would be like if I used difficult words and jumbled them up into a difficult sentence but it didn't contain a good story. It is a tragedy. I can't imagine anything more tragic. You don't have to use complicated and difficult words in order to write a masterpiece.

Every time you publish a new book, numerous critics come flooding out at the same time from various locations. Do you think those numerous critics judge you fairly?

-I don't read reviews. Japanese critics are not very friendly towards me. I also heard that there are many critics in Korea who says that my books pollute Korean traditional literature but Japanese critics are even worse.

What is the most common misunderstanding that people have of you?

-I'm not sure since I don't read critics, but according to my wife who often reads it, Japanese critics seem to have a dogma that Japanese literature should go 'this way.' But I'm not going 'this way' but 'that way.' I think they are frustrated over that. Moreover, my books are being sold in various places around the world, so they seem to think the themes of my books should be set differently as a Japanese writer.

How do you handle all the talk that goes on about you?

-I've become stronger. Think about suddenly becoming famous. You have to become strong in order to survive. One moment, people are praising you as a global writer and in the next moment, they are using you. It's like riding a roller coaster. When <Norwegian Wood> sold well, I was depressed. It was a burden to me. And as you well know, critics don't like bestseller writers.

There must have been many things that have hurt Haruki-san's heart.

-My debut work <Hear the Wind Sing> sold 30,000 copies and <A Wild Sheep Chase> sold 130,000. I was comfortable with those numbers. Very successful books sell between 100,000 to 150,000 copies. However, when <Norwegian Wood> came out, suddenly 2 million copies were sold and from then on, all my stress began. I felt like I lost my balance. However after <Norwegian Wood>, the number of readers went back to 200,000. My more recent work <After Dark> sold 300,000 copies. I like it at that level. It is comfortable.

Haruki took much time to think at this point and spoke carefully. His English was not eloquent, but simple and sincere.

In <A Distant Drum> Haruki explains his sentiment at the time like this: "Whenever I looked at the bestseller list of newspapers, <Norwegian Wood> was No.1 in all bookstores...However, I know saying this may sound arrogant, but I couldn't escape from feeling sorry for me. Wherever I go, I couldn't find a place where I can stay. After <Norwegian Wood> sold more than a million copies, I became very lonely... Now that I think of it, it doesn't suit my constitution to be in that situation. I could never be that kind of personality nor do I have the capacity to be a world famous bestseller writer."

However, Goethe, a German philosopher, once said that a writer who can't expect more than a million readers should not write a single sentence. Was he wrong?

-According to my standard, he is not right. Even if only a small number of people read my books, I would write, because either way, I have to express myself no matter what. I can't stop. I write because I have to write.

Then did you ever write a book that you knew wasn't going to sell well? One that you know will not be popular? Like a film director that made a movie although he or she knew that it wouldn't be that popular with the general public.

-I never wrote to make a best seller but also, did not write thinking that I would be the only reader. What should I say? I think my readers are somewhat addicted to my style. They are loyal to my work. So if my next work is at an okay level, I trust that they will read it. If the book is awful, they will be disappointed and won't buy it. But at least I am confident that it won't be awful.

It's wonderful, Haruki-san.

-haha, is that so? It seems pretty good so far, huh? I also like love stories. A boy meets girl and they fall in love, so and so. But in writing those novels, there is a risk of making my readers confused. As a writer, I constructed in my own way, a flow or a direction. For readers who trust and follow me, I believe that they have faith or confidence in the kind of novel that I will make, and I don't want to disappoint them.

Where is the final destination of the path you are walking?

-My goal is to write a book like <The Brothers Karamazov>.

What aspect of the book appeals to you? Is it the complex and diverse characters and plot?

-Of course. However, that is not all. <The Brothers Karamazov> contains the entire universe. Various facts and systems, worlds, and stories are all contained in that book. I've read it several times but I learn something new every time.

<The Great Gatsby> is another well-known favorite of yours. However, some readers, who read the book because you've said it was so excellent, don't understand why you love it so much. What about it appeals to you?

-<The Great Gatsby> is like a textbook to me. I learned everything about writing from that book- how to form a story, how to move the characters, how to construct a conversation. I've read it innumerable times and still read it. Every time I read it, there are things to learn. The words are good, the sentences are smooth, and the story is excellent.

You once wrote that you will prepare everything and translate <The Great Gatsby> someday.

-Yes. It was probably when I was 34. I promised to myself that I would translate <The Great Gatsby> before I turned 60. Some years are still left before I turn 60 but I finished the translation last October. In just 10 days after it was published, 140,000 copies were sold. A lot of readers must have been waiting.

How would you evaluate your translation of <The Great Gatsby>?

-I think it was well done. There are five or six translated versions of <The Great Gatsby> in Japan, but I think mine is the best.

Where does that confidence come from?

-Without a doubt it's the best one. While I was translating, I thought very carefully about which Japanese words, or sentences could replace the original text in <The Great Gatsby> and selected them. That was quite difficult, but at the same time, it was very interesting.

Other than writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler, Richard Brautigan, and Kurt Vonnegut- which you mention often- are there any Japanese writers that you like?

-Oe Kenzaburo. I haven't read many works of Japanese writers, but I like his work. Since I was young, I preferred foreign literature. I was especially fascinated with Russian literature and as I began learning English, I started to enjoy reading in English as well.

Are there any writers today who are comparable with them?

-Mm, I haven't found one yet. There are writers that I like, but I haven't found any writers that made me want to write like them, like I did when I was a child.

In Korea these days, works of new Japanese writers are extremely popular. Young Japanese writers such as Ekuni Kaori, Yoshida Shuichi, Kaneshiro Kazuki, and Onda Liku are called "Post-Murakami Haruki." What do you think about them?

-Before I answer, you know that I am still young (laugh)! Frankly, I hardly read any Japanese modern literature. When I'm not writing, I'm usually translating. I usually

read the books that I'm translating and others related to that book. So, there is no time to read any other books. Besides, even if I don't read them, they seem to be all doing very well.

Once you wrote in an essay that a student sent you a manuscript asking you to evaluate the novel. The student offered to buy *unagi-don* (rice topped with broiled eel). So, you met the student and gave your evaluation. Do you offer your advice to anyone who buys *unagi-don*?

-Did I really say such a thing? These days, I rarely critique other people's manuscripts. From time to time, I receive such requests, but politely decline. Regardless of whether it is helpful or not, I don't like criticizing. However, if a charming lady asks me, "Will you read my manuscript?" how could I say no? (laughs)

Very well. Then if a pretty woman comes to you and asks 'What do I have to do to become a novelist like you?' what would you tell her?

-Well, I think becoming a good novelist is not about having a talent for writing, but more about having a knack for writing. I never thought that I was born with a talent, but the instinct to write was always with me. It made me write. It is my fate.

When you were young, did you think that you would have a successful life such as this?

-Not at all. First of all, I never imagined I would become a writer, so I was extremely surprised. When I became a novelist at 29, my friends were also surprised. When I was young, I didn't want to write anything.

You didn't even keep a journal?

-No, I really hated writing a diary. I hated letters too. But my wife says that I wrote very good love letters-Now that I think of it, I think my wife and I got married because of the letters I wrote. You know, I am a professional writer by trade (laughs).

Then what did you want to be?

-Well, nothing really, only that I really loved music and opened a jazz bar. I had fun working, although I eventually wound up writing novels.

You must be speaking of the jazz bar "Peter Cat." That was even before I was born. I am curious what kind of music you played at the time.

-I actually have hopes to reopen it some day. At Peter Cat I mostly played 60s jazz. Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, and John Golden...

If you were to become the owner of Peter Cat once again tonight, what songs would you choose?

-If it were tonight, well...all jazz, for one. Mmm...what should I choose...ok, a Billie Holiday number.

Which of her songs would you like to play?

-Any one. I used to pick up any of Billie Holiday's albums and play them. Regardless of my feelings or the weather, the songs she sings are all fantastic.

Good. Let's go back to novels. Do you often feel compassion for the main characters? I become sad and lonely as I read your novels.

-Of course. Without compassion, you cannot write anything. You said you read <Sputnik Sweetheart>, right? The protagonist is a 19-year old lesbian. I began writing this novel after I turned 50, so what would I know about the thoughts of a 19-year old girl or a lesbian? I didn't know anything. I couldn't know. However, I made all efforts and cast myself into the character, Sumire. When I approached with that compassion and lived as Sumire, I could paint a picture. "Ah, this must be how she felt when she was in love. This is why she was sad." I looked at the world through her eyes. Everything begins from strong sympathy.

<Sputnik Sweetheart> begins with: "In spring, at the age of 22, I fell in love for the first time. It was an intense love like tornado that tears straight across the vast plain." This story depicts love between two women. How was the main character of the Korean lady Miu born? Was there an actual model?

-My assistant is a second-generation Korean-Japanese. She helped for the past ten years. Working very closely with her, and I got many ideas from watching her. She told me many stories about her family. I'm not the type that does a lot of prior research before writing a book except on very rare occasions. Even when I wrote about Shikoku, the background for <Khafka on the Shore>, I had never gone near there. I went there after I wrote the book and it was like, what should I say, a kind of déjà vu. I've never been to Korea, but based on her stories, I imagined.

Have you ever experienced love 'Like tornado that tears straight across the vast plain'?

-Hmm...yes, when I was young. Definitely, truthfully, it wasn't a recent incident (laughs).

Could you tell me a little more about it?

-It's not that romantic...(As if reminiscing on the past, he lowers his head and thinks for about two minutes before finally speaking)

I'm sorry, but no comment.

What is your reason for not commenting?

-Just that I want to keep my memories inside me.

At this point, the designated two hours were up- although he had only shifted his position once to recross his legs from the left to the right. He seemed to have yet more to say and I had more to ask. So about 40 days later, on the last day of November, we sat across from each other once more on the same wooden chair.

Until this moment when I got to shake Haruki's warm, wrinkled hand the second time, we each spent quite a lot of energy. For some reason, he seemed to want to delay the second interview. Haruki displayed obvious signs of fatigue, having come back only ten days prior from receiving the Franz Kafka International Literature Prize.

Thank you for your time. Haruki-san. Although I sent several e-mails and called your house and even your cell phone, I couldn't help thinking I didn't have the right to do all this. I wanted to respect the fact that you value privacy and freedom above other things.

I realize it might be a bit hard to believe me, especially when you see me coming with a photographer and an assistant as well.

-I believe you. If I were to give an excuse for not answering you right away, I was a bit tired after returning from Prague and was refusing all interview requests. Also, as I mentioned before, my principle is to do all interviews just once, and not over two hours. Anyway, I'm glad you understand.

How was Prague? You look a bit tired.

-Prague, the city itself was nice, but the awards ceremony was not at all a happy event. There were too many media members. I asked TV recording to be strictly limited to Prague local broadcasting companies, but later I found out they sold the recording to a Japanese broadcasting company. It was on national news in Japan. Even now I feel uncomfortable. That is why I have been avoiding all media contacts since then. I have been taking a more sensitive, defensive stance than usual.

Haruki-san, you do not seem to be a person who gets angry easily. What are the things that displease and irritate you?

-Reporters, cameramen, and people working in the media.

Oh, before asking you more about it, could you say I'm an exception.

-Okay, you are excluded (laugh).

I understand the embarrassment you must have regarding the Prague awards ceremony event, but the media may say that it was their responsibility to let the people know, since you are a celebrity writer that entire Japan and Japanese are deeply proud of.

-If I were a baseball player or an actor, then it would be right to show my face on TV. But as a writer, I shouldn't have to appear on TV, right? If the writer wishes, he has the right to be anonymous.

Was receiving the award in itself a happy event?

-Frankly, no. I'm not interested in that kind of literature award. Most people don't remember who won the Nobel Prize for Literature last year or the year before. What people remember are good stories, good novels. To me, readers are everything. If readers remember my novels, then I am happy. Literature awards are forgotten, so they do not have great significance.

But still, I'd think that it would be nice to have people who use different languages than you read your works, recognize your potential and acknowledge your reserved abilities.

-Yes, that is just about it. I am complete with just that- no more than that fact.

Your works are recognized internationally and your name will be remembered by many even after your generation. Despite these factors, do you think you still have more to learn? Or are you satisfied with your current talents?

-Really? Have I really become a writer of that status? I am only enjoying myself. Even if someone tells me, "Haruki-san, you don't have to write any more," I will continue to write. When there is free time, some people go watch a movie with their girlfriend, and others may go watch a baseball game, but I write because I want to write.

When you write, what kind of items are on your desk?

-My keyboard, computer, coffee...I'm a caffeine addict. When I lived with a cat, the cat was always next to me. Now that I travel around, I don't have a cat. Before I quit smoking in '83, I smoke a lot of cigarettes at the head of the desk. However, when I write, I usually organize the desk so that it is clean and organized.

Like the desk, is your life when you write novels disciplined as well?

-Yes. When I'm not writing books, it is chaos itself, but once I'm started on a novel, I become very organized. I wake up punctually at 4a.m. like a businessman and usually concentrate writing in the morning until 9 or 10a.m. I never miss a day in order to maintain the flow.

Don't you ever get tired of words?

-No. Up to now, that's never happened. Even I consider myself a workaholic. Even if I'm not writing novels, I have to write something. For the past five to six years, not a day has passed without writing. Whether it was an essay or translating, I was always writing something...

Did your parents buy you a lot of books?

-They really bought me a lot. Both of my parents were high school teachers and I think they knew how important books are.

What else do you remember from your childhood?

-The cat. The cat was my friend, my younger sibling. I don't know why I loved the cat so much. It was just soft and warm and like me, so individualistic.

What made you excited as a teenager?

-Hm. Those days all I did was watching movies and reading books. In high school I had a girlfriend and we mostly went to see movies together. I liked movies by directors like Jean-Luc Godard or Francois Truffaut but because of my girlfriend I saw happy melodramas instead of tragic or grotesque films.

When you were in your 20s, what kind of work did you focus on?

-In my 20s, I recall nothing but working. At the time, I really worked like crazy. I got married when I was a student so I had to earn money but I also opened a jazz bar, so I had a lot of debt to pay back.

What was the biggest event in your 30s?

-Becoming a writer. Once you find something you truly like, the rest of your life becomes easy to predict. It would not have been very surprising if I had become a novelist because I had wanted to become a novelist. But I became a novelist even though I had no thoughts on becoming one. I was very thankful for that. Becoming a writer was not just the biggest event of my 30s, but the biggest blessing of my life.

Now you are 57, what things now make you happy?

-When I was 22, I liked dating with girlfriends. Now, I feel most happy when I'm

writing.

I can't believe you're more happy writing than dating. Haruki-san, what would be your idea of an attractive woman, or to borrow your words, a "100% perfect girl?"

-Hm..the 100% perfect girl...actually, I don't expect much from women (laughs). They are so complicated beings. I just expect them to have a good time when they are with me. No matter how pretty or smart a girl is, I can't like her if I'm not able to connect with her through conversation. However, if she laughs at my jokes and has a good conversation with me, I'd be very happy with that.

What do you think are qualities that a gentleman should have?

-Hmm.., always being kind to women, and being honest. But it's not easy to always be honest in front of women. Being kind, at least, is something that can be achieved through effort.

From those standards, how many points do you get as a gentleman?

-Well, I think I'm quite kind and I'm not that demanding to ladies.

What was the reason you so kindly accepted this interview?

-I had a feeling that it would be a good opportunity to meet Korean readers. I also never had an interview with a Korean magazine. Besides Japan, the first to show interest in my novels was Korea, Korean readers. In that sense, Korean readers are very special to me.

Our discussions on a "good novel" will continue after this interview. However, no matter how many words are exchanged, the world is still inauspicious and reading will not save kids in pain in Africa. What do you think the literature is for?

-A long time ago, I received a letter from one of my Korean readers. She was a 20-year old girl. She said that after reading <Norwegian Wood>, at 2a.m. she suddenly wanted to make love to her boyfriend and ran to his dormitory.

If it's a good story, I believe that it can not only move the reader's emotion but also action. A good story induces some kind of direct response. A good story works as a common language for all countries. People in Korea, United States, Russia, and Vietnam all use different languages but when they see a good story, they can be touched in the same way and be sad and happy. Conflicts between countries are worsening, but literature is working as a force to change the world gradually. Stories have a power that is stronger than any political strife or social dispute.

In his debut <Hear the Wind Sing>, Haruki wrote, "Everyone around me told me, 'If that is a novel, then I could write it.' I also think the same. If that work was commonly used as a novel then anyone could write something like that. But at least, of all the people who said that, not one wrote a novel. Probably they didn't feel the need to write it. If there is no need- even if they can and have the ability- nobody will write things like novels. But I wrote one, which probably means that I have that much necessity inside me."