

# Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, and Issues of World Literature: An Interview with Professor Rebecca L. Walkowitz

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## Abstract:

In this interview, Professor Walkowitz shares her experience reading and teaching the contemporary British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro. Talking about Ishiguro's latest novel *The Buried Giant*, Professor Walkowitz points out that the ending of this novel, rather than being bleaker than all the previous ones, in fact links with all of them by involving a kind of willed optimism that seems untrustworthy and dubious. When discussing the status of Ishiguro's works as English literature and world literature, Professor Walkowitz posits that he has been exceptionally important to the project of historicizing the concepts that have defined English Literature, and that his parody of Englishness is often misread as an expression of Englishness, as in the case of *The Remains of the Day*.

**Key words:** Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, *The Remains of the Day*, English literature, world literature

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Liu: Professor Walkowitz, thank you so much for agreeing to accept our interview. I would like to begin our interview by discussing with you a few questions about Kazuo Ishiguro, Nobel Prize winner of 2017, before moving on to larger issues of translation, and world literature, if that is fine.

I was thrilled to know that you have deep interests in Kazuo Ishiguro, and that you have taught him for years. I got to know him when I was pursuing my DPhil degree in the UK, and then I taught him for three years when I started my teaching position

at Beijing Normal University. To me he is definitely one of the most brilliant contemporary novelists of Britain. Would you like to talk a little bit about your first experience reading his works?

Walkowitz: I think the first time I read one of his novels was in the mid-1990s, when I was a PhD student at Harvard. By that point, the well-known film adaptation of *The Remains of the Day* had been released, and I had seen it, but I hadn't yet read the novel or any of the other novels. One of my advisors at the time, Professor Philip Fisher, mentioned that there were two earlier novels, about Japan, that he thought I might find interesting, so that's where I started. I'm pretty sure I read *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) before I read the Booker-Prize-winning *Remains*, though that was certainly the most famous of his novels to date. I had been reading Marcel Proust and Henry James, and I remember thinking right away that Ishiguro had managed to adapt their formal subtleties and representational strategies to a postcolonial critique of American triumphalism with dazzling originality.

Liu: That is a very insightful finding. Would you like to share with us your favourite novel of his?

Walkowitz: My favourite novel is *An Artist of the Floating World*. I have taught it many, many times – eight times in a lecture course of up to 350 students I taught at the University of Wisconsin in the early 2000s – and it works remarkably well to bridge the early modernist concerns about the aesthetics of patriotism with mid- and late- twentieth-century concerns about whether artists have a role in politics, and what strategies of aesthetic representation create the most ethical template for remembering the past. There's also a great connection between the analysis of masculinity and war in *Mrs. Dalloway* and Ishiguro's treatment of that topic in *Artist*. He comes back to it again in *Remains*, but *Artist* is really the closer fit.

Liu: Many of Ishiguro's novels, such as *The Remains of the Day*, *When We Were Orphans*, *Never Let Me Go*, describe the protagonist's rather tragic realization of the limitedness of one's horizon, and of one's judgment, which ultimately lead to the futility of one's lifelong endeavours. However, despite this heavy realization, there is always a sense of redemption by the end of the novels, when the protagonists take heart and face the tragedy of life squarely, preserving their dignity.

In his latest novel, *The Buried Giant*, however, the sense of redemption seems to have evaporated, when the loving couple Beatrice and Axl were separated by Death forever, without any chance of seeing each other again. I felt completely devastated reading the last sentence of the novel: “but he does not hear and he wades on.” Do you think there was a change of tone, and how would you interpret it?

Walkowitz: For me, the endings of the novels have always involved a kind of willed optimism that seems untrustworthy and dubious. Stevens in *Remains* and Ono in *Artist* insist that they feel good about their lives and will now simply look forward to a positive future. But we know from the novels that the rhetoric of forward-facing optimism is linked to the rhetoric of British and Japanese imperialism and the forgetting of various causalities: the tiger, the housekeeper, the Jewish maids, the betrayed student in *Artist*, and the victims of the China campaign. So in that sense I find the ending of *The Buried Giant* more similar than different, insofar as the future may or may not be happy – the couple may be reunited but probably not – and here the husband seems to relinquish the willed optimism he’s had up until this point. The person he does not hear is Death, perhaps because he is not able to forgive or be forgiven. It’s certainly a starker scene, but I think Ishiguro has been pretty stark about forgiveness – or the kind of forgiveness that involves forgetting – from the beginning.

Liu: I think that is an incisive argument about the linkage between *The Buried Giant* and Ishiguro’s previous novels. Indeed the optimism in previous novels is in a way willed and dubious. I hadn’t fully realized that, but now it all makes sense.

On a different matter, I think Kazuo Ishiguro uses parody very frequently. Take *The Buried Giant* for example, he makes frequent allusions to the 14-century romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The sharp contrast between the young Sir Gawain and the aged one, respectively depicted in these two works, foregrounds one of the themes of *The Buried Giant*, the passing of time and the unstoppable advancement of old age. Would you agree with this?

Walkowitz: Yes, I agree. He’s interested in what heroism looks like when it ages – or when its priorities age and are reframed from another perspective. In this sense, the aging of Gawain is similar to the aging of Stevens and Ono, except in *Gawain* we have a fictional character, a kind of symbol of Heroism. By parodying the story, he’s taking on that symbol and rewriting it.

Liu: Indeed. Also, in *The Buried Giant*, the aged she-dragon which was so easily killed by Wistan the young knight reminds us of the aged Beowulf and his heroic deeds of dragon-killing, which ultimately cost him his life. How should we make of this intertextual reference?

Walkowitz: I think there's a sense that the age of heroism is over, and we're now looking back at its costs and its prevarications. At the center of the story is not the physical struggle over the dragon itself but the ethical struggle over what the dragon's enchantment has enabled.

Liu: And that is exactly why the killing of the she-dragon was, instead of the climax of the novel, an anti-climax, which contrasts with the Beowulf epic so forcefully. Other than these, it also occurred to me that the name of the female protagonist Beatrice reminds us of Dante. Do you think there are some hidden messages here?

Walkowitz: I hadn't thought about that, but I now see that there is a whole bookshelf of epic texts that Ishiguro is activating here. It seems to me that Ishiguro is parodying the genre of epic as a way to reflect on the fantasy of English liberalism and tolerance. This has been one of his central topics from the beginning, and it is right at the center of *Remains*, where we see that fascism and anti-Semitism were nourished in the English countryside. In *Giant*, Ishiguro is focusing on the way that the veneer of English consensus is not only a product of British political culture but also a product of British literary history. It is that history that's he's taking up in the novel.

Liu: I like this idea of *Giant* engaging with the British literary history, which is why we find such an abundance of literary references in this novel! Thank you very much for obliging my obsession with intertextual references in *The Buried Giant*. Let me now move onto a larger issue concerning Kazuo Ishiguro's novels. It has been generally agreed that although he does not have English ancestry, his works often betray a real sense of "Englishness", with *The Remains of the Day*, of course, being the most salient example. Do you think his works thus challenge the way we define "English literature"?

Walkowitz: Well, I think Ishiguro has been exceptionally important to the project of historicizing the concepts that have defined English Literature, by which I mean

that he helps us see how those concepts have become attached to England's idea about itself and what has had to be forgotten, repressed, or excluded in order to make those concepts function exclusively and coherently. Sometimes, Ishiguro's parody of Englishness is misread as an expression of Englishness, and I think that's what's happened in the reading of *The Remains of the Day*. But if you read *Remains* alongside *Artist*, then it becomes clear that what is passing for Englishness (not discussing, not acknowledging, robust literalism) is really a kind of willful forgetting that is anti-democratic and nativist.

Liu: Indeed *The Remains of the Day* has so often been read as an expression of Englishness. Thank you for your incisive reminder that it is in fact a parody of it! That will alter in significant ways the way we understand the novel, as well as the novelist. On another yet related matter, people often argue about to what degree does Kazuo Ishiguro borrow from Japanese literature. I am wondering what your opinion is on this question.

Walkowitz: This is a hard question to answer in good part because early twentieth-century Japanese literature borrowed from French literature, and French literature borrowed from Japanese literature and art. So when we notice that there are some similarities between, say, Tanizaki and Ishiguro, is it because both authors were influenced by French modernists such as Proust, or because Proust was influenced by the French fascination with Japan, or because both Tanizaki and Ishiguro are interested in the conjunction between European and Japanese culture? I think one of the projects of Ishiguro's fiction, especially in the first three novels, is to highlight those intersections, both as a matter of literary history and as a matter of geopolitical influence and rivalry.

Liu: I should really go back to read his Japan-themed novels. These literary intersections are so complex yet fascinating, leaving so much for scholars of world literature to ponder.

In your work, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, you examine writers whose works are born translated, which cross the boundaries of national literature and become world literature through the conduit of translation. Could you talk about how Kazuo Ishiguro falls into this category?

Walkowitz: Ishiguro's works have been widely translated, but he was one of the

first major contemporary novelists to talk about how the fact of translation has influenced the way he writes his novels – the words he chooses, his emphasis on narrative structure, and his avoidance of regional idiom and historical reference. But in addition, I've argued, his work has always expressed suspicion about claims to originality, native belonging, and national coherence. For that reason, it tends to be very open to translation as a model of intellectual and political hospitality. *Never Let Me Go* is a novel about valuing the uniqueness of clones and indeed of understanding the copy, not the original, as the condition of literary creativity.

Liu: That makes it a perfect metaphor for the practice of translation, doesn't it?

Kazuo Ishiguro calls his own writing "international writing", which I suppose is in opposition to "local writing" or "regional writing". In your opinion, what features constitute "international writing"? Are works that deal with universal human feelings and conditions, such as memory, loss, love, and death, qualify as international writing, hence world literature?

Walkowitz: I think international writing can be about any topic, though it is difficult for a literary work to be read by international audiences if it requires local or regional knowledge, by which I mean knowledge presumed by the book but not provided by it. In my view, what makes Ishiguro's writing international is its ongoing interest in the relationship between large-scale and small-scale practices of hospitality. In so many of his novels, he tells us about who had to die or be excluded or what had to be sacrificed or forgotten in order to build a coherent and optimistic vision of national collectivity. So many of his novels are about failures of cosmopolitan hospitality: betrayals that lead to genocide, torture, death, and exploitation. Yet, the novels also represent moments of compassion and friendship that operate in tension with those failures. I think that's why the ends of *Remains*, *Artist*, and even *Never Let Me Go* feel redemptive, or more redemptive, as compared to the end of *Giant*. But I think the tension between monumental failure and momentary success are there in all four.

Liu: And that perfectly wraps up some of the most important questions we have discussed today! It has been really inspiring doing this interview with you. I have had an opportunity to reflect on many established ideas about Ishiguro's works. I look forward to reading many of your future works about his works and about world literature. Thank you again for accepting our interview!

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## Author Profiles

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Rebecca Walkowitz is distinguished professor and chair in English and affiliate faculty in comparative literature at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (Columbia, 2015), *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (Columbia, 2006), and she has edited or coedited several books, including *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* (Columbia, 2016, with Eric Hayot). She is past president of the Modernist Studies Association.

Jane Qian Liu is assistant professor in Chinese Studies and Translation at the University of Warwick. She has published in English and Chinese about various issues in contemporary British literature, modern Chinese literature, and translation studies, including *Transcultural Lyricism: Translation, Intertextuality, and the Rise of Emotion in Modern Chinese Love Fiction, 1899–1925* (Brill, 2017), “Parody and Irony: Cavalier Literature in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*”, *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (Dangdai waiguo wenxue) no. 3, 2016.