

ANDREW BENNETT

Introduction

Regularly cited as one of the most important novelists writing in English today, Kazuo Ishiguro is the author of eight novels, a short-story collection and several uncollected short stories, as well as song lyrics and scripts for the cinema and for television.¹ Beginning with *A Pale View of Hills* in 1982, Ishiguro's novels have consistently focused on the effect on individuals of larger cultural, political, and historical movements and dilemmas in ways that have captured the imagination of an international readership while also gaining enormous critical acclaim and forging for themselves a place in the contemporary literary canon. With Ishiguro's position in British and World literature confirmed by the opening of his personal archive at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas in 2017, and by awards such as the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017, the Japanese Order of the Rising Sun in 2018, and a British knighthood for services to literature in 2019, this is undoubtedly the moment for a *Cambridge Companion* – a volume designed both to take stock of and to reconsider Ishiguro's remarkable body of work. While the chapters in the present volume are concerned most of all with his consistently profound, intriguing, and highly readable novels, they also range across Ishiguro's other creative output and draw on the many illuminating interviews that he has given over the last four decades.

Along with countless reviews and magazine and newspaper pieces, Ishiguro's work is the subject of several hundred academic book chapters and full-length scholarly journal articles, as well as a number of research monographs, essay collections, and student-oriented textbooks.² The present volume draws on this work by gathering together a range of established and emerging scholars from the UK, Europe, the USA, and East Asia. Offering a survey of the key works and themes while also moving critical discussion forward in new and challenging ways, *The Cambridge Companion to Kazuo Ishiguro* aims to offer an essential guide for both students and established academics. Wide-ranging in its engagement with Ishiguro's writings, the

ANDREW BENNETT

volume allows for key themes and questions to be fully addressed while also affording space for detailed discussion of specific works.

Ishiguro's novels and short stories focus in innovative ways on fundamental questions of humanity and personal responsibility, on aesthetic value and political valency, on the vicissitudes of memory and historical documentation, and on questions of family, home, and homelessness in relation to personal and social identity. His writing speaks in distinctive ways to some of the major communitarian questions of our time: nationalism and colonialism, race and ethnicity, migration, war, and cultural memory and social justice. And his novels and short stories do so by closely following the reconstruction in narrative form of the experiences of individuals who are, almost invariably, calamitously fallible because all-too-human (or in the case of clones or AI robots, all-too-human-like). But Ishiguro's consistent and variously charged thematic focus on the relationship between personal responsibility and – or *for* – social harm is also notable for its highly accomplished deployment of the inherent resources of language, narrative voice, and narrative structure. A supreme prose stylist whose work is notable for the ways it exploits the subtle, sometimes almost imperceptible rhetorical malfunctions and inarticulacies of narrators, for the expressive lapses in memory and in the moral rectitude of the individuals who people his stories and tell their tales, Ishiguro's novels are notable for the skill with which characterization and voice are intricately intertwined, and for the sophistication with which they challenge formal and generic preconceptions about the novel form itself.

Forever Flinching

Born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954, Ishiguro's family moved to England in 1960 when his father took up an initially temporary but soon permanent post as a research scientist at the National Institute of Oceanography in Surrey. In interviews about his life and work and through the themes and narrative techniques of the novels and stories, Ishiguro traces the condition of being caught between two or more worlds – a condition hinging on questions of belonging and home, on immigration and cultural displacement, on nationality and ethnic or racial difference, and, especially, on language itself as a non-transparent, non-'obvious' medium of communication. 'I wasn't a very English Englishman, and I wasn't a very Japanese Japanese either', Ishiguro memorably commented of his earlier self in a published conversation with the Japanese writer Kenzaburō Ōe in 1989 (*CKI* 58).

Ishiguro's migrant condition and the fact that English was the second language he learned to speak might account in part for the unique and often

Introduction

quietly surprising ways that his writing develops, and responds to, language. The precise, carefully poised, lucid prose of his novels is itself testament to the difficulty and complexity of saying what you mean and meaning what you say.³ And his writing is intimately engaged with the hidden occlusions, obfuscations, and displacements that words allow a speaker: ‘I’m interested in the way words hide meanings’, he commented in a 1990 interview, with a keen eye on the paradox of a writer saying such a thing (CKI 71). Whether it is a clone who unquestioningly adopts the euphemistic language of discrimination in *Never Let Me Go* (‘normals’ for the privileged natural-born people in a society; ‘completing’ for the death of a clone whose vital organs have been harvested), or an AI robot who records the dystopian vocabulary of privilege and brutal social categorization and effective segregation in *Klara and the Sun* (‘lifted’, ‘social interaction scores’, ‘substitutions’, ‘interaction meetings’, ‘continuation’, ‘slow fade’), Ishiguro’s novels exploit the way the words we use both disclose and conceal ideas, actions, and circumstances, political as well as personal. But in other ways, too, and just through their often almost wilful blindness to their own condition and to the societies in which they live, Ishiguro’s first-person narrators often conceal as much as they reveal about what they themselves often don’t really know or understand in the narratives they tell us. That words can *hide* meaning is perhaps a given in relation to pretty much any literary work. But Ishiguro’s novels are particularly attuned to the ways narrators conceal and camouflage meanings and do so not least from themselves. Language has this ‘other function’, Ishiguro comments in an interview, ‘which is to conceal and suppress, to deceive one’s self and to deceive others (CKI 51). Thus, he remarks, his most famous novel, *The Remains of the Day*, is ‘written in the language of self-deception’ (CKI 38). The major innovation involved in Ishiguro’s mastery of narrative technique is arguably that it reminds us not just that we shouldn’t necessarily trust narrators but that, as he puts it in another interview, there is a ‘deep reason’ why ‘we all have to be unreliable narrators’: ‘most of us when we look at ourselves’, he says, ‘have to be rather unreliable in order to face ourselves’ (CKI 139). And this sense of unreliability goes deep – into the structure and trajectory of Ishiguro’s novels, and into our understanding, such as it is, of his characters. After all, with the exception of the occasionally personalized but predominantly third-person narrator of *The Buried Giant*, all of Ishiguro’s narrators are also the protagonists of the stories they tell. It is prose that works through what John Self has recently characterized as a ‘raw’ and indeed ‘almost demented’ kind of narrative ‘purity’ that consistently refrains from offering any kind of authoritative commentary on a narrator-character’s perspective, personality, ethical choices, actions, or voice.⁴ Framed as they are by his narrators’ occluded sense of themselves, the

ANDREW BENNETT

exigencies of Ishiguro's narratives mean that his language itself is, as he puts it, 'forever flinching from facing up to something' (*CKI* 23). And it is in relation to the varied ways in which people flinch from the truth in the words they use to think and talk about themselves that Ishiguro organizes his remarkable and quietly subversive, hauntingly evocative novels.

Turning Points

To introduce this volume and to offer an overview of Ishiguro's work, we might consider the overview of his life and work that the author himself offered on the occasion of his Nobel lecture in Stockholm on 7 December 2017.⁵ *My Twentieth Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs* is notable as one of the few public statements that Ishiguro has made on his work outside of the many interviews he has given over the years. And as well as offering a commentary on his career and insights into his working life, the Nobel lecture amounts to something like an exemplary instantiation of modern authorship. Arranged in eight sections, the lecture is structured around a series of six moments – 'small breakthroughs' – in the author's professional or writerly life, the often 'small, scruffy moments' with their 'quiet, private sparks of revelation' that, he explains, are 'important turning points in a writer's career' (*TCE* 30). Ishiguro's lecture, in other words, is a kind of authorial memoir, a brief writer's life.⁶

The lecture begins with Ishiguro's arrival at the University of East Anglia in 1979 sporting a fashionably drooping moustache and shoulder-length hair to begin an MA in Creative Writing – the kind of endeavour that has become, over the intervening forty years, something of a rite of passage, a professional qualification, for a modern author.⁷ Ishiguro remembers himself as a writer or writer-in-embryo: he has had a radio play rejected by the BBC and has otherwise only completed two short stories (which he judges to be 'not so good') and begun a third with the intriguing if perhaps somewhat unpromising theme of 'an adolescent who poisons his cat'.⁸ Renting a room that is 'not unlike the classic writer's garret', the aspiring novelist sets out to 'transform' himself 'into a writer' (*TCE* 3–4). The breakthrough or 'turning point' in this section involves Ishiguro's realization that Japan could be the subject matter of his first novel – a surprising turn, he suggests, in an era before globalization, multiculturalism, the emergence of 'World Literature' as a category, and the marked public emphasis on minority ethnic narratives of more recent decades.

The second breakthrough or turning point comes after a brief flashback on Ishiguro's arrival in England in 1960 at the age of five and the consequent transformation of Japan for the boy into a matter of memory and

Introduction

imagination. Offering tantalizing and strategically placed personal biographical details, Ishiguro explains that it is now 1983 and that he is living in a modest rented flat in London with his wife, Lorna, and working on his second novel. Reading Proust, he ponders the difference between a screenplay and a novel and recognizes the capacity for prose fiction to express the ‘richness’ of ‘inner movements impossible to capture on the screen’ (*TCE* 16). The breakthrough comes as a new understanding of the novel’s potential to explore what will become Ishiguro’s major theme in novels from *An Artist of the Floating World* in 1986 to *The Buried Giant* in 2015: ‘the many layers of self-deception and denial that shrouded any person’s view of their own self and of their past’ (*TCE* 17).⁹ In a sense, the statement encapsulates the primary focus and force of Ishiguro’s novels. Mostly written in the first person, each novel concerns the narrator’s self-deception and denial as a governing narrative strategy and theme. The following breakthroughs may be seen as nuances on and developments of this central organizing thrust of Ishiguro’s writing.

The third turning point revolves around *The Remains of the Day*, and Ishiguro’s realization that narrative power can be generated through the collapse of a dam of emotional repression: the butler, Stevens, seems almost to be able to see that his whole life – and his sense of dignity, loyalty, duty, and professionalism – has been a kind of terrible error.¹⁰ Like the Imperialist Japanese propaganda artist Masuji Ono in Ishiguro’s previous novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, Stevens’s tragedy is in being a person who firmly believes that he is on the right side of history – always in Ishiguro a dangerous conceit – only to find later on that he really wasn’t. The fourth breakthrough comes after a visit to Auschwitz in 1999, from which Ishiguro recalls realizing that while his work has often turned on the ‘struggle’ between forgetting and remembering for an individual, in the future he will need to focus on the necessity of amnesia for a whole community or nation (a theme that will be fully realized twenty-five years later in *The Buried Giant*) (*TCE* 25).¹¹ A further revelation has to do with a move from individualized, character-centered narratives to relationship-driven plots in his novel *Never Let Me Go* (*TCE* 29). The final breakthrough is a response to the ‘dangerously increasing division’ that he perceives in the rise of Trump, Brexit, and right-wing populism in Europe and across the world. Arguing that the post-war liberal-humanist consensus involving a progress narrative of increasing tolerance and freedom is in danger of being overtaken by ‘Far Right ideologies and tribal nationalisms’ (*TCE* 33), Ishiguro argues that the next generation of writers – a generation from which the then sixty-three-year-old writer excludes himself – will have to find ‘a new idea, a great humane vision, around which to rally’ (*TCE* 6).

ANDREW BENNETT

The Parallel Person

Ishiguro's carefully curated overview of the turning points in his career, framed as they are within a series of intimate domestic scenes from a twentieth-century life, offers an exemplary presentation and indeed performance of authorship: this is what the author – or at least what a certain kind of highly successful and internationally esteemed contemporary author – looks like. Indeed, the Nobel lecture opens itself up to a reading in which 'Kazuo Ishiguro' becomes a character in a scene of his own writing. In this sense, Ishiguro is not only a privileged commentator on the body of writing that is ascribed to his name but himself something like a fictional character constructed out of that body of work – while also of course being an embodied human being who lives, breathes, is married to Lorna with whom he has a daughter and a house in North London, writes books, gives interviews: someone who does all the things that we might minimally expect a standardly functional human being to do, including eating, sleeping, breathing, thinking, deciding, talking, and moving and behaving in certain ways.

The key breakthrough or turning point that Ishiguro describes, I have suggested, is the recognition that 'many layers of self-deception and denial' may be said to 'shroud' a person's sense of 'their own self and of their past' and that these layers may themselves make the basis for a novel. On the one hand, the comment refers to a key thematic consideration in Ishiguro's work: each of his novels is concerned with, and in almost all cases narrated by, an individual whose view of themselves is partial, shrouded, self-deceiving, faulty. Ishiguro's novels, we might say, are about nothing other than this, at heart – about the fallible, ignorant, self-deceiving, amnesiac, uncertain narrator-protagonist coming up against the intractable forms of their own denial. On the other hand, the comment has to do with the individual who makes these books and who, *along with or on account of them*, constitutes the author, Kazuo Ishiguro. Standing on the podium in the Swedish Academy in Stockholm, reading from the lectern, is the author who is also a construct, a fiction of authorship – not only the originator or inventor of a certain body of work but in effect himself an invention of that work, part of what is fabricated, contrived, or assembled by it. It is significant, therefore, that there's a kind of quiet, urbane, outwardly modest, restrained, dignified, largely affectless, careful, considerate, and humane tenor in the rhetoric of Ishiguro's lecture and in its performance – and in the persona, the body language, the speech patterns, the intonation, the dress code that Ishiguro projects in his public appearances more generally. But it is a persona and person that is itself reflected in, or that reflects, the prose, the subject matter, and the narrative personae – the narrators and protagonists – of the novels.

Introduction

It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that Ishiguro's novels consistently foreground the question of professional behaviour, ethics, and competence. Almost all of Ishiguro's novels focus, one way or another, on the entwining of the protagonist's identity with a profession – on a person's professional competence or excellence, and their pride in their work. Ishiguro's novels emphasize the skill of a Japanese water-colourist, the dignity of an English butler, the brilliance of a concert pianist, or the supposed genius of a famous detective. In the case of *Never Let Me Go*, it is the care and dedication that Kathy H., the narrator, offers her dying patients that is emphasized. Similarly, *The Buried Giant* plays imaginatively on the early-medieval myth (or cliché) of the values inherent to the figure of the warrior-knight, while *Klara and the Sun* is in part about the professional dedication, loyalty, and even pride that an AI robot takes in performing her duties. As some of these examples starkly indicate, however, Ishiguro is consistently concerned with the ways in which what seems to the narrator to constitute a redemptive dedication to and identification with their profession can also (and therefore) involve collusion with a terrible social and ethical harm. Rather than being a strategy that will resolve the finely calibrated discrimination, injustice, or inequity of a society, dedication to what one sees as one's professional duty can even, through collusion in or with societal norms, exacerbate the harm that one is attempting to diminish.

But as a critical element in the Ishigurian *oeuvre*, this consistent probing of the paradox of professional excellence opens up important questions for authorship itself. If one consistent element in Ishiguro's fiction involves the recognition that professional excellence can, by virtue of that very excellence, be harmful, then his novels also raise the question of what harm an *author* might unwittingly effect, since for a writer like Ishiguro – a writer lucky or talented enough to make a living from his work – authorship can truly be said to be a profession. The writer Kazuo Ishiguro, in other words, is deeply implicated in these meditations on professionalism. For more than two hundred years, after all, poets and novelists have been held up as exemplary beings, unacknowledged legislators, whose work has the potential to 'save' us within the terms of what Leo Bersani has memorably named the 'culture of redemption'.¹² But if the writer is not vatic, not a seer or prophet, if the writer is fallible, cognitively limited, ethically compromised, mortal, or just wrong – as Ishiguro variously acknowledges of himself in interviews – and if we nevertheless trust authors to offer us some kind of wisdom, knowledge, or truth, then the very act of writing novels, of being an author, is complicated and perhaps compromised or indeed deficient. Authorship is itself implicated in, collusive with, a system (the system of, or that relies upon, ignorance, fallibility, self-deceptive pride, political naivety) that it seeks to question or transcend.¹³ And yet Ishiguro's recognition of

ANDREW BENNETT

this authorial condition is, we might say, at the same time a key dimension in his humane, ethical, and politically astute narrative vision.

Following the publication of his most famous novel, Ishiguro would regularly insist in interviews that ‘we’re all like butlers’: we’re all like butlers, he would say, because none of us ‘know enough about what’s going on out there’.¹⁴ But his insistence on saying that we are all like Stevens – the butler in *The Remains of the Day* who looks back from 1956, the moment of the Suez crisis, to his time dutifully and unquestioningly managing an English country house for an aristocratic owner who embroils himself in fascist politics by negotiating with the Nazis in the lead-up to the Second World War – should also be interpreted as Ishiguro saying first of all of himself ‘I am like Stevens, I am like a butler’. There is no hard line, in this thinking, between the text and the author – the flesh-and-blood man whom you observe on the podium of the Swedish Academy in the online video or whose words you read on the pages of the printed lecture. Kazuo Ishiguro – at least the ‘parallel person’ that he has taken to referring to in interviews recently, the one who gets reviewed and who has received quite a remarkable number of ‘gongs and things’¹⁵ – is in part himself a construct of the novels that have made such a profound impact on Anglophone and indeed World literature over more than forty years, and that have forged for themselves a place in public consciousness and in an always emerging, ever developing, literary canon. And it might be said that it is the self-effacing professional modesty in Kazuo Ishiguro’s recognition of the limitations of authorship that in the end allows for – that generates, indeed – the urgency and evocative affective power of the body of work that goes under his name.

Notes

- Ishiguro ‘now ranks among England’s most distinguished contemporary novelists’; he is ‘one of the most accomplished and celebrated writers of our time’; ‘one of the world’s most important contemporary writers’; ‘generally considered to be one of the finest writers working today’; ‘among the most celebrated writers in contemporary Britain’ (Brian W. Shaffer, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p.1; Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis, ‘Introduction’ to *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.1; Matthew Beedham, *The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.10; Wai-Chew Sim, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p.1; Chu-chueh Cheng, *The Margin without Centre: Kazuo Ishiguro* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), p.1). As Peter Sloane comments, ‘few authors are greeted with, or are greeted with and *sustain*, the degree of international criticism and popular acclaim that Ishiguro has inspired’ (*Kazuo Ishiguro’s Gestural Poetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p.161).

Introduction

- 2 For details of some of this work, see the Guide to Further Reading section at the end of this book.
- 3 Critics such as Vanessa Guignery and Adam Parkes have started to make clear the care and *difficulty* involved in producing these effects by their scrupulous examinations of the draft materials in the Ishiguro Archive at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Austin, Texas: see Guignery's chapter on 'The Ishiguro Archive', in this volume, and Parkes, 'Ishiguro's "<Strange> Rubbish": Style and Sympathy in Never Let Me Go', *Modern Fiction Studies* 67:1 (2021): 171–204.
- 4 John Self, review of *Klara and the Sun*, in *The Times*, 24 February 2021.
- 5 In addition to its publication as a book by Faber & Faber, *My Twentieth Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs* is available online on the Nobel Prize website in English and in Swedish, French, German, and Spanish translations, together with a video of the lecture: www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/ishiguro/lecture/.
- 6 As Sloane points out, turning points are often highlighted in Ishiguro's novels themselves, not least by the use of the phrase 'turning points' (*Kazuo Ishiguro's Gestural Poetics*, pp.7–8); see also Ivan Stacy's discussion of turning points in Ishiguro's novels in Chapter 16, below, pp. 241–5.
- 7 See Jason Puskar, 'Institutions: Writing and Reading', in Ingo Berensmeyer et al., eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.438, on creative writing courses as preparing individuals 'not just to write better, but to *be* authors, to perform professionally'.
- 8 All three stories were published by Faber & Faber in 1981 in a volume of stories by 'New Writers', as 'A Strange and Sometimes Sadness' (first published in 1980), 'Getting Poisoned', and 'Waiting for J'.
- 9 This may be said to be a theme, retrospectively, even in his 1982 novel *A Pale View of Hills* – and then most recently in *Klara and the Sun* (2021).
- 10 See Guignery's discussion of the 'missed life theme' in Chapter 6 in this volume (pp.102).
- 11 See Ishiguro's comment that 'for that moment, unfortunately, I couldn't think how I'd do it' (*TWE* 25).
- 12 See Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- 13 In recent interviews, Ishiguro has even questioned the value of writing fiction as such. Speaking to *Wired* magazine in March 2021, for example, he notes how important science was during the Covid-19 pandemic but also how far politicians like Donald Trump have gone in subverting rational and truthful discourse. 'The idea is that the truth is what you wish to believe. Feel it emotionally strongly enough in your heart', he comments:

People like me have placed so much emphasis on the importance of emotional truth; I create things like novels that are supposed to kind of move people. And it has made me kind of pause a moment. Looking at these two completely opposed attitudes to coexisting in a massive way in our lives at the moment, I kind of wonder if I actually contributed to this idea of what you feel is the truth. (Will Knight, 'Klara and the Sun Imagines a Social Schism Driven by AI', *Wired*, 8 March 2021: published online at www.wired.com/story/kazuo-ishiguro-interview/)

ANDREW BENNETT

- 14 See CKI 87: ‘Often we just don’t know enough about what’s going on out there and I felt that that’s what we’re like. We’re like butlers.’ See also p.101: ‘What we do is we do a job, we work for an employer or organization or maybe some cause – political cause – and we just do a little thing. We hope that somebody up there, upstairs uses our little contribution in a good way. . . . In other words, we’re rather like butlers.’
- 15 Bryan Appleyard, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro Interview: “We Can Fly Too Close to the Sun”’, *The Sunday Times*, 21 February 2021 (accessed online at www.thetimes.co.uk/article/kazuo-ishiguro-interview-we-can-fly-too-close-to-the-sun-t65x5s5xv).