

### Teachin' Books Episode 1.3 – Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

**00:10** Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and on today's episode I am talking to... myself!

I'm really behind on editing interviews for the podcast. In some cases, I recorded those interviews even a couple of months ago – I'm so sorry (!! ) to those of you who are waiting – so I thought it's as good of a time as any to talk about a text that I like to teach with, which is *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. And I love this text. I love this novel! And students also often –not always but often – love it ! And there's also a film version, by the way, starring Carey Mulligan and Andrew Garfield who I also love, both of them, and also starring Kiera Knightley. (That was, like, a weird way of suggesting I don't like Kiera Knightley, but no, I just really like Carey Mulligan and Andrew Garfield – ANYWAY!)

It's a really beautiful, tragic, and compelling, richly developed story. It's a story about... essentially, clones. If you follow the podcast on Instagram (@TeachinBooksPod), you'll know that "clones" was my sneak peek keyword that I used to announce this episode before I officially announced this episode. But that's a word that's *barely* even used in the novel – I think only twice, if that – and I hope to get into some of the reasons why as I chat about teachin' this book in this episode.

\*But first – by the way, that's a reference to Big Brother, if anyone watches that show. That's a really good hashtag that Big Brother always uses for its transitions. I would love to get #ButFirst started here as well. -- #ButFirst: let me give you your spoiler alert! Please do go read the book first. Right now! Right this second! Go get it! ...if you don't want to have the book spoiled for you. Or go watch the movie, which will give you a general idea of the plot. I also like the movie, as I just said. So, once you do that, if you care about spoilers, come back and hear me chat away about *Never Let Me Go*...

\*

[Music: "Homer Said"]

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan, raised in England, and is a widely, widely celebrated and critically acclaimed writer.

He won the Nobel prize in literature in 2017. You may have heard about that little prize. And this novel was published in 2005, so 12 years before that win. It's classified a little bit differently depending on, I guess, the person classifying it: as speculative fiction, as science fiction, as dystopian literature, as Gothic literature, even (I know the person on the back cover of my edition suggests that it's Gothic).

And I'll tell you a little bit about the plot. So, in the opening pages we get a page that says we're in England in the 1990s, the late 1990s. The whole novel follows the lives of these characters, these humans I guess, they're essentially "cloned" from other humans. But at the same time they are also thinking, breathing, feeling, fully physically and emotionally rich, present, conscious, developed characters. Yet, their whole purpose in life – these characters, these clones – is to eventually, and also when they're still pretty young in adulthood, start to give "donations" of their organs, their body parts, in order to keep sort of "natural"-born humans healthy and living longer, in order to help them overcome diseases and that kind of thing.

The “donors,” as they’re quite euphemistically called, end up dying from their donations, usually after their third or so donation, sometimes earlier, sometimes later. So, they die young, essentially. But they don’t call it “die” in the story-world, they call it “completing” (another example of the many euphemisms that the story-world uses to disguise the violence that’s built right into the very structure of the book’s society).

This novel follows three donors in particular: Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy. Kathy is the narrator, Ruth and Tommy are her friends from childhood onward to, eventually, Ruth and Tommy’s deaths. At the end of the novel, Kathy is still alive, but she’s transitioning from her role as a carer to donor. Basically what carers do are they care for the folks who are going through the donations. Once they’re done their role as a carer, then they themselves move into giving up their own organs in the donation program. So, at the end of the novel, Kathy is sort of transitioning from a really long career as a carer, to finally giving her own donations.

**05:27** There’s also a love story that’s part of this novel. It’s pretty compelling. Ruth and Tommy are in a romantic relationship for a whole bunch of the novel, even while the novel continually intimates that Kathy and Tommy are actually in love with one another or should kind of “belong” together. But by the end of the novel, Ruth sort of “backs away” so to speak, and admits that she recognized all along that she had been standing in the way of Kathy and Tommy being together. But she only really does that when her and Tommy are already in the donations stage of their lives, and she dies soon after that, and then so does Tommy in the end. So Tommy and Kathy don’t get to live much of a life together, in love.

The novel is structured in three parts, which actually makes it quite easily teachable from a sort of chronological perspective or in a linear fashion. So you can really teach it part-by-part, which doesn’t really work for all novels.

So, each part follows the three stages of the characters’ lives. The first part is set in Hailsham, which is the school that the characters grow up in. And it has a reputation as being “more ethical” than the other ways of raising clones. It’s just like a general boarding school. It’s a place that the children can have usual childhood antics, they get an education, they build relationships, they play... have moments of play and sport, they have developing sexual, romantic interests in each other, they start to practice creativity, like painting and that sort of thing. So, part one is really their childhood in Hailsham where they are being quote-unquote “ethically raised.”

Part two takes place at the Cottages, and this is kind of like their “young adulthood” after they leave Hailsham. In the Cottages, they all kind of live together. They get a taste of quote-unquote “normal” human life, ish, they start to watch tv, they ingest more human culture, they work on these essays that they’ve been tasked with completing as sort of one of the arbitrary tasks that they’re given throughout their lives to kind of help them make meaning. They develop stronger or at least more complicated relationships with one another, at the cottages. And they also learn to navigate the human world, and they get as close as they seem to come to “passing” for real humans

Then, in part three, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy start their work either as carers or as official donors. So in Kathy’s case, she’s caring throughout part three, because we never actually see Kathy as a donor. In Ruth and Tommy’s case, we hear and see, I guess through the novel’s world, them donating their organs and eventually, as I said, die, or complete. We see them complete, in Tommy and Ruth’s cases. So, part

three is really all about that medical aspect of their lives – the purpose for which they’ve been designed. They finally reach that purpose, so to speak.

\*

[Music: “Homer Said”]

So when I teach this book, I do usually teach it in kind of three chunks, according to the three parts of the novel. Like I said, that doesn’t really for me anyways work for every novel. Sometimes, or often, I will teach thematically. But this one I actually teach in three parts, following the parts of the novel.

And among the topics I address, there are things that we discuss like genre, narrative perspective, audience, paratext – which is Gerard Genette’s term for... it’s his term for any elements that surround the text and present the text but are not part of the text proper. So that can be elements like the cover, the title, the copyright page, epigraphs, or author’s notes – that sort of thing. So, I will often talk about paratext when I teach this novel. I’ll talk about, and give a sort of Coles notes-version of Self vs. Other, and in general I’ll talk about ethics. And that’s the thing I want to chat about today.

**09:54** This is a novel that’s all about ethics: around relationships, around social injustice, structural harm, the human/non-human divide. And so I’m gonna focus on that a little bit today. One of the massive ethical questions of the novel is troubling the boundaries that we put between human and non-human / self and other / those we identify with and those we see as fundamentally different from ourselves. The question, essentially, is what makes someone “human”?

Because, of course, this is a novel about the ways in which a society has sectioned off living, breathing, feeling beings into two kinds: first, the quote-unquote “real” humans, who are born naturally and thus worthy of life. And on the other hand, the quote-unquote “not-real” humans, who are created through cloning but just as present and conscious and animated as the real humans, but whose sole purpose is to keep the quote-unquote “real” humans alive and healthy.

That obviously already gets at the ethics of how we treat each other as humans, or at the ethics of the “human/non-human” divide. But I do teach this novel in literature classes, in classes where we’re studying sort of the formal, technical elements of literature. And one of the benefits of teaching this novel is that it’s one with very well-crafted formal elements that really get at the larger questions that it addresses.

So, you can talk about this big ethical question – you know, “what does it mean to be human?” – through, for example, the novel’s narrative perspective. And narrative perspective is something, obviously, we like to talk quite a bit about as one of those fundamental building blocks of literature, and of the study of literature. So, in this novel, I think I mentioned that Kathy is the narrator. Kathy is the “I”, the first-person perspective. And I always ask students, why? Why do you think it’s Kathy in particular who gets this narrative voice, who gets prioritized as the narrator? And part of the reason has to do with this big question of the ethics of humanity and of who gets counted as a human. Because the human reader really builds empathy for, and connection with, and intimacy with this supposedly not-quite-human character, through Kathy’s first-person perspective. And through that sort of rich interiority that we get of hers – seeing through her eyes, seeing the world as she sees it, navigating through Kathy’s eyes – the reader ends up seeing Kathy as human.

So, as far as thinking about how we teach narrative perspective and why we teach narrative perspective, through studying this novel's narrative perspective we can get the sense that there is an argument built right into the narrative perspective of the novel: and that argument is that Kathy is humanized, rendered human, through the first-person perspective. The novel's narrative perspective encourages us to see this sort of "non-human figure" as, indeed, human.

Another formal aspect of the novel that gets at this ethical question of the human is the audience. So, I don't actually mean the readers here, although I kind of do. Throughout the novel, Kathy is using second-person address. She keeps on referring to a "you" and reaching out to a listener or to an audience member or to a reader by saying "you, you." And that reader, or that audience, is positioned as if they are a fellow-donor. So, she'll say things like "I don't know what it was like where you were, but at Hailsham we blah blah blah..." So, throughout the novel we get the sense that Kathy is talking to a "you" who is also a fellow donor but who she doesn't know a lot about, or at least not enough to really pinpoint who the "you" is. But that's important because what it's doing is really asking the reader to adopt the position of a donor, to be the "you" in the novel, to be the person Kathy is talking to. So the novel is asking the reader to adopt the perspective of somebody in the minority who has been likewise asked to give their life for the sake of the majority. Again, there's a rhetorical maneuver built right into that, built right into the fact of Kathy's audience, because the book is deliberately placing the reader into the position of the "you" – the fellow donor that Kathy is reaching out to. So right there we have a troubling of the kind of human-donor divide because the reader's being asked to take on the position of a donor.

**14:59** And one last formal aspect of the novel that technically, like formally, gets at this big ethical question of *the nature of humanity*: is that the reader comes to very slowly infer that these characters are not natural-born humans. The novel doesn't outright say on the first page, like, "we are clones, and blah blah blah," right? That bare, fundamental fact of the novel – that this is a novel about, essentially, clones – is obscured in the narrative so as to build a relationship between the reader and the characters, so that the reader for example comes to see Kathy, the narrator, as a *human* before the details of this cloning and donation system are revealed to the reader. So you therefore connect with her humanity *first*.

I always ask students, when did you realize that this was a book about clones? And they give varying answers, and a lot of them have looked up the book, or sometimes I do an assignment ahead of students coming to class having read the book, where they have to look at the Wikipedia page and sort of review it. So, depending on the class, depending on the context, I'll get students who either say, "oh I knew from the beginning, before I even read the book," or I'll get students being like, "I didn't know until page, like, 200 that they were, oh they're actually clones? Okay, I get it now." And that's a deliberate move in the novel. It's a novel that obscures those details from you so that you as a reader get to know the characters as human. That's part of its rhetoric. It's part of its argument that it's making. So, for me, I always say that p. 138 in my edition is the first explicit, most explicit, mention that these are characters who are actually clones. But you can locate that sort of reference differently depending on what you consider to be an explicit reference. But really it's a novel that, quite honestly, benefits from you not spoiling it for yourself ahead of time, not even reading the back cover, so that its technical elements, its formal elements, in this sort of narrative obfuscation, can really do what they're there to do.

\*

[Music: "Homer Said"]

So beyond the formal elements I've just been talking about, the book also gets at this big, ethical question about *what it means to be human, to be given the dignity and value of humanity*, through larger, ongoing discussions that it shows us about the ethics and the politics of the kind of society that turns its head at injustice, the kind of society that apathetically looks on as these characters, these donors, are being raised and essentially butchered for the sake of other human beings.

So as I mentioned before, the book is filled with euphemisms that suggest this world is not comfortable coming to terms with what it's doing to these people. So, the clones are raised as quote-unquote "students" – students being a word that evokes education and growth and not *being raised to die*. Then, after they're students they become "donors," which sounds pleasant, it sounds giving, right? It's a little bit closer to the truth, versus students, but it still has this euphemistic quality. And then, finally, they "complete," as I mentioned. They don't die, they complete, as if this is a goal achieved, or their mission in life has been fulfilled. So, these are euphemisms that really disguise the true nature of the violence happening in this society. As I mentioned, they are rarely called clones, maybe once or twice in the novel (at least once that word is used). And even the characters themselves, they call their human referents their "possibles." When they go to find Ruth's original human form, they call that person a "possible," which just sounds like it has so much potential – like a "possible," that sounds good! I guess that's what a euphemism does, right, is that it makes something that's really fucked up and makes it sound pleasant or good. Like, "ooh, there's my possible! And I'm going to die soon because of that person and other people like them who need my body parts."

Another way that the novel gets at this question of humanity, the ethics of humanity, how we treat one another, is through Hailsham itself. I'm focusing a little bit right now, and for this podcast, on the first part of the novel. Hailsham itself was founded on this pseudo-"ethical" mandate that the donors should be raised ethically, as children with full lives and an education, as I said, and with moments of play and sport and art, children who are taken care of, all of that, right? But then they're still shipped off to start donating their organs for humanity a little bit later, once they've reached adulthood.

**20:04** So, at one point, Miss Emily, one of the former teachers or instructors and advocates of the Hailsham method, says to Tommy and Kathy that Hailsham is a "more humane and better way of doing things" (258). She figures Hailsham as the counterpoint to those places where "students [are] being reared in deplorable conditions, conditions you Hailsham students could hardly imagine" (261), she says. And again, she says, "[W]e at least saw to it that all of you in our care, you grew up in wonderful surroundings. . . . I hope you can appreciate how much we *were* able to secure for you. Look at you both now!," she says to Tommy and Kathy, "You've had good lives, you're educated and cultured" (261). "[Y]ou must realise," she says, "how much worse things once were. . . . Before [Hailsham], all clones—or *students*, as we preferred to call you—existed only to supply medical science. In the early days . . . that's largely all you were to most people. Shadowy objects in test tubes" (261).

So, I've just read out a bunch of passages that, in class, I normally close-read – you know, this idea of "shadowy objects" and "test tubes" really dehumanizes the characters and makes them a product of science. You know, even that word "shadowy" connotes a kind of obscurity, as if real humans, natural-born humans, can never really know these other humans. They are "shadowy" to them and they are mysterious to them. So, there's a lot to close-read here. But I just really bring these up as examples of the larger engagement with ethics that this novel has.

Hailsham really builds up this fiction, this false reality, around the students, *almost* (but not quite, but almost) treating them as if they're regular humans that will live full lives, but then the students start to realize, or as they grow up they are told a little bit more, that for example they need to keep their bodies in tip-top shape for donations, that their purpose is to be donors, to donate their bodies, that they won't be able to have children of their own, and so on and so forth. So as the students grow up, there's this slow transition from false dreams, and idealism, and leaning into the fictions that have been constructed through euphemisms around them .... To finally, in the end, a really harsh wakeup, a harsh acknowledgement, about their tragic lives and their tragic purpose.

So, as you can imagine, the donor system in this book acts as a metaphor for all kinds of things, but including the injustices of a capitalist system that relies on the violent and often fatal oppression of sections of society in order to make sure that other sections of society can, in essence, live the capitalist dream. The novel really explores how willful ignorance and apathy can play a part in perpetuating injustices, such as injustices that come from capitalism. Miss Emily says, sort of echoing one of the passages I read earlier, "for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum. . . . But by the time people became concerned about . . . about *students*, by the time they came to consider just how you were reared, whether you should have been brought into existence at all, well by then it was too late" (262-3). She says, "The world didn't want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked. They didn't want to think about you students, or about the conditions you were brought up in. In other words, my dears, they wanted you back in the shadows" (265).

So, Miss Emily actually says here that one of the things that perpetuates the injustice of the donation system is people's ignorance, their wilful desire to keep the clones in the shadows, they prefer to believe that these organs appear from nowhere – much like, thinking of the capitalist metaphor here, some of us prefer to believe that our clothing just pops into existence without any of the labour, without knowing any of the labour that goes on behind it. Miss Emily really suggests that this desire not to think about where things come from, such as where these body parts being donated come from, has been one of the harmful dimensions, the violent dimensions, of her society. She's laying it out here: that apathy, wilful ignorance, the desire just not to know, all of that has played into why and how generations of these humans, these beings, have been slaughtered.

**25:14** One last quote: Miss Emily says, "[F]or a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter" (263). In the end, the book provides a rich, prolonged meditation on how humans treat other humans; on the injustices people are willing to ignore for the sake of their individual lives; on the categories we erect around who counts and who doesn't so that many of us can continue on in our safe, healthy, comfortable lives.

\*

[Music: "Homer Said"]

So, clearly, this novel has massive relevance for this very particular contemporary moment. I'm thinking, of course, of COVID-19 and this way-too-often circulating idea of "sacrificing some" for the good of the majority, for the good of the many, for the good of the healthy, that sort of thing. This book is really timely, despite being written some time ago, and published some time ago, because it's unflinchingly confronting this question that many folks, especially able-bodied folks, are uncomfortable facing up to,

which is: Who gets to suffer for the sake of whose health? Who gets to suffer for the sake of whose health, wellbeing, and quality of life?

COVID-19 has shone a light on the embedded eugenicist or ableist thinking all around us. For example, this idea you hear quite often (you can see it on social media or just in casual, everyday parlance) that “elderly, compromised, or at-risk people should just stay home, protect themselves, be especially careful, but then the able-bodied world can get on with their lives and their outings and their entertainment and their vacations.” That’s a really fucked up way of dealing with a global health crisis. That’s absolutely harmful and ableist and has eugenicist dimensions that suggest that the strong are the ones that will survive, the healthy are the ones that should survive or ought to survive or ought to live their lives fully.

So, in addition to reading this novel, maybe teachin’ this novel, thinking about how the novel intersects with issues of whose bodies count in this contemporary moment, I wanted to encourage you also to check out the work of Dorothy Ellen Palmer, who is a disability activist and writer. You can find her @depalm on Twitter. Her work on Twitter and elsewhere has highlighted and critiqued these ableist and often eugenicist discourses around COVID-19. And since COVID and before COVID, I’ve learned a lot from her, so I’d love to share her work with you if you haven’t come across it before.

Okay, last thing: If you teach with this book, or with the film, you should let me know how you do so. So tell me your thoughts, your approaches, your ideas! Email me at [TeachinBooksPod@gmail.com](mailto:TeachinBooksPod@gmail.com) or get in touch with me via Instagram or Twitter @TeachinBooksPod. I really wanna know!

\*

[Music: “Homer Said”]

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of the podcast, for listening to me rambling on in my microphone about this very dear-to-me book! I really appreciate all the support I’ve been getting and I want to send lots of gratitude back to each and every one of you.

**29:20** This episode was recorded on Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis. Because we’re talking about a text that some have categorized as *science fiction*, I wanted to tell you about an awesome podcast on that very topic: it’s called Métis in Space, a podcast created by two Métis podcasters who are now based on Treaty 6 territory, in Edmonton, Molly Swain and Chelsea Vowel. So, I’m just going to read from the Google Podcasts description so you get a good sense of the podcast here: “What happens when two Métis women, who happen to be sci-fi nerds, drink wine and deconstruct the science fiction genre from a decolonial lens? Molly Swain & Chelsea Vowel break down tropes, themes & the hidden meanings behind the whitest genre of film & television we’ve ever known.”

So, Métis in Space was one of the first podcasts I ever really started hearing about in my circles, I think this was back in 2015 or so? I also know it was one of the first I ever subscribed to on my desktop computer, which is hilarious to me because I do not listen to podcasts on my computer anymore, at all, only on my phone. It’s so smart and it’s so funny and I just highly recommend it. So, please check out the Métis in Space podcast for all your sf-meets-cultural criticism needs and desires. You can find them at <http://www.metisinspace.com/> -- do people still say www? I’m not sure – or you can find them on a podcatcher of your choice.

Alright: I would like to thank Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at <https://soundcloud.com/dyallas>.

I also want to VERBALLY THANK Jade McDougall at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics. I have yet to say that on a podcast episode because I keep forgetting, and then I put it in the shownotes, but that is not enough. So, I would really like to thank Jade out loud.

You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod (no “g” in that teachin’!). To chat about the podcast, use the hashtag #TeachinBooksPod, which AT LEAST ONE OTHER PERSON HAS NOW USED! So, a big thank you to my friend Devan for using the hashtag, and if anyone else wants to join her... I will make sure to, if I see it, say your name on the podcast! I am absolutely not above bribes because... oh, I always love when podcasts do, like, lists of names of supporters at the end. It’s always so fun. Anyway, use the hashtag. Use the hashtag, y’all, use it. I mean, I’m not even sure if you need to. You can also just use my handles. But, I mean, it’s fun. Use the hashtag.

If you like, and you wanna send me a longer note – which I would love to read, by the way – you can also get in touch with me via email at [teachinbookspod@gmail.com](mailto:teachinbookspod@gmail.com). Send me a note, talk to me, tell me what you like, tell me what you wanna hear! Tell me your teachin’ stories. Ask me some questions. Whatever you like.

And, finally, listeners: goodbye for now, but please join us again next week on Teachin’ Books -- no “g,” ‘cause here we’re all about unruly spellin’ and teachin’.

[Music: “Homer Said”]