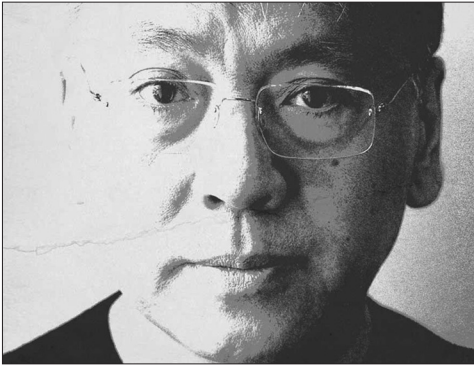


A Past Best Forgotten Histories and Stories in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*

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KAZUO ISHIGURO

Introduction

WRITING ABOUT the past is no longer what it used to be. Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction enacts the postmodern position of the grand narrative that has lost its credibility (Lyotard 1984, 179). Postmodernism itself is now a thing of the past (Frow 1990, 141), just as modernism became passé, perhaps even more predestined to become history due to its "post" label which defines it as something too anchored in its time to last. As Bradford remarked, we now live in an era in which we witness the end of grand narratives of conventional history (Bradford 2007, 80).

The present paper analyses the implications of going back in time, sometimes on a wide, national scale (the level of history) and other times on a deeply personal level (the level of telling one's story) in three of Ishiguro's novels: *The Buried Giant* (2015), *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *Never*

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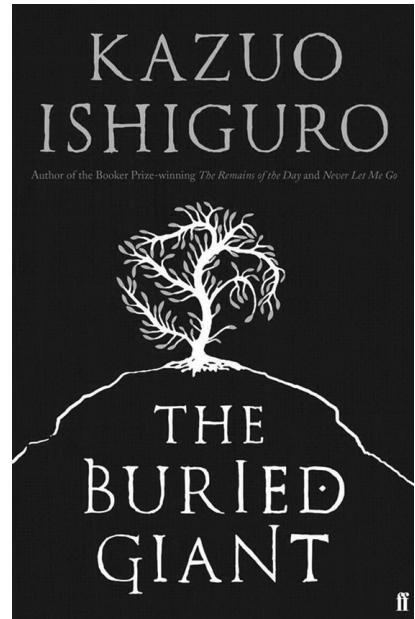
Let Me Go (2005). All of Ishiguro's novels deal with the issue of memory at some level, but these three works are particularly representative of the manner in which going back into the past helps shape the characters' identity, their failures and, generally, bring to the surface a certain feeling of nostalgic loss that is now almost a trademark of Kazuo Ishiguro.

A Postmodern Take on History

THE *BURIED Giant* is a novel that can be read from this postmodern perspective on history. The historical background in which the novel is set is purposefully ambiguous. Not much is known about the period right after the Romans left Britain and this is particularly significant for the main issues raised: collective amnesia, a past that is supposed to have been so cruel that it is best forgotten, individual histories questioned by the manner in which the novel addresses lifelong connections among people. Reconstructing the past is a subjective process, as it can only be seen through the present:

. . . there are important parallels between the processes of history-writing and fiction-writing and among the most problematic of these are their common assumptions about narrative and about the nature of mimetic representation. . . . that teller—of story or history—also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. (Hutcheon 1989, 56)

History becomes an entirely subjective matter as it is now up to the storyteller what story they choose to tell. The events of the past are no longer important in themselves, as the past is only relevant when seen through the lens of the present. The past is contextualized and highly personal. Nations are raised to the level of narrations and individuals can rewrite them however this fits their personal purposes. Frederic Jameson uses the concept of national allegory, “where the tell-



The Buried Giant (2015)

ing of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself” (Jameson 1986, 85). The narrator in *Midnight’s Children* sums this up as he wonders about getting Gandhi’s death date right: “Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?” (Rushdie 1981, 166).

Amnesia and Memory

AMNESIA FURTHER complicates matters, for it makes history even more unstable and less reliable. In Melley’s words, amnesia “has also become a metaphor for historiographic dilemmas—for the sense that it is no longer possible to ground historical narratives securely and that the failure to do so has led to dangerous forms of collective forgetting” (Melley 2003, 107).

In *The Buried Giant* telling stories and “histories” does not come easily, as most characters cannot remember much about either their personal story or their national history. Axl and Beatrice, the elderly Briton couple at the center of Ishiguro’s novel, suffer from amnesia, as does everyone living in the region. Right after the end of the Roman rule in Britain, Saxons and Britons lived in relative harmony. The couple decide to start a journey to find their son, but neither time nor space are of any help. They cannot remember their son and they do not know where his village is because of the “mist,” a spell cast over the entire region, possibly even nation, by Querig, the she-dragon that must be slayed so that memory is returned to both Saxons and Britons. After they are joined by Wistan, Edwin and Gawain, this becomes the main goal of their journey, to restore collective memory: “There, princess, there’s nothing to fear. Our memories aren’t gone forever, just mislaid somewhere on account of this wretched mist. We’ll find them again, one by one if we have to. Isn’t that why we’re on this journey?” (Ishiguro 2015, 52).

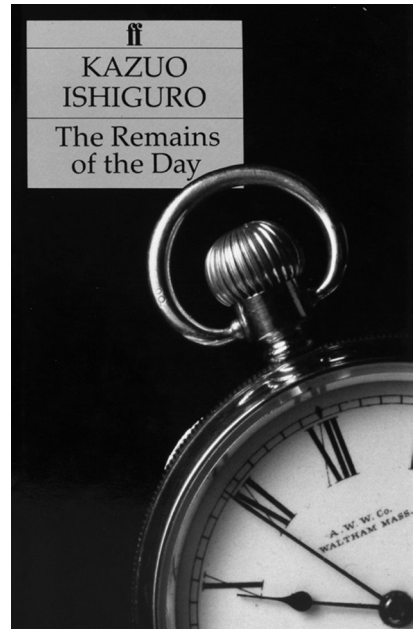
This collective amnesia is a particularly powerful tool as it enables two communities to live together, to get over a supposedly cruel and barbarous past that is best forgotten, while vaguely remembering that they are supposed to be hating each other.

Collective memory loss seems to be crucial for people so that they can live together. When memory breaks down, one can no longer tell stories about the past. The present is conveyed as separated from the past and individual stories can only continue to exist against this background of an ambiguous, shared history.

Telling stories and histories can only be done by accessing memories. Most of Ishiguro’s novels use memory as a means of narrating the story, and go-

ing back in time is central to novels such as *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*. In *The Remains of the Day* Stevens's memory is touched by nostalgia and this makes him an unreliable narrator. The referent is almost dissolved in the inconsistency of Stevens's unreliable narration (Hopârtean 2018, 140). In Jameson's words, "the past as a 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (Jameson 1993, 75).

However subjective and unreliable this storytelling process may be, it is profoundly relevant as it is a pretext for a meaningful search of Stevens's own identity. In his journey through the English countryside and into his past, the main character of *The Remains of the Day* configures both space and time in terms of what he perceives it means to be English (Hopârtean 2018, 140). Ishiguro says that he has not "attempted to reproduce, in an historical accurate way, some past period" and that what he is trying to do is to "rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England" (Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda 1991, 139).



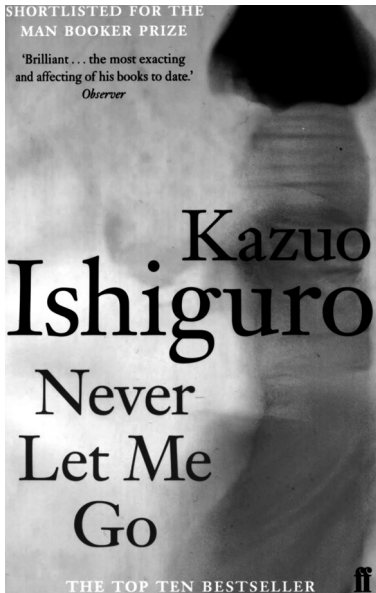
The Remains of the Day (1989)

Time, Space and Identity

IN *THE Buried Giant*, time and space are almost equally important in setting a mythical scene in which the story unfolds:

You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated. There were instead miles of desolate, uncultivated land; here and there rough-hewn paths over craggy hills or bleak moorland. Most of the roads left by the Romans would by then have become broken or overgrown, often fading into wilderness. Icy fogs hung over rivers and marshes, serving all too well the ogres that were still native to this land. (Ishiguro 2015, 3)

Pixies, ogres and dragons are part of the background and never questioned, helping to circumscribe a dark, prescientific age in which societal memories are buried.



Never Let Me Go (2005)

Never Let Me Go is also about journeys in time and space, as Kath drives through the English countryside, much like Stevens, while reminiscing about a past that the characters shared at Hailsham and the Cottages before becoming either “carers” or “donors.” *Never Let Me Go* is, at its heart, a painful story about love and friendship in the face of the limited time the characters have to live their own separate stories. Their entire identities had been shaped from childhood with a view to becoming first carers and then donors. Kath and Tommy live in the shadow of an existential loneliness, just like Axl and Beatrice, for their lives are separate due to their roles. Kath is a carer, while Tommy is a donor, and it is impossible to defeat this sense of otherness and be happy for a few more years:

“I suppose you’re right, Kath. You are a really good carer. You’d be the perfect one for me too if you weren’t you.” He did a laugh and put his arm round me, though we kept sitting side by side. Then he said: “I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it’s just too much. The current’s too strong. They’ve got to let go, drift apart. That’s how I think it is with us.” (Ishiguro 2005, 277)

The image is very much alike that of Axl and Beatrice floating together in the two separate but tied-together boats.

Love and Wounds

BOTH COUPLES fail the final test meant to prove that they truly love each other. Katy and Tommy hope to obtain a “deferral” from becoming organ donors and they even try to “apply” for such a deferral, which is allegedly only granted to couples who manage to prove that they truly love each other. The entire attempt fails however, when Kath and Tommy find out that Madame only collected their works of art throughout their childhood to prove that clones such as them had a soul and there was no such thing as a deferral.

Similarly, to complete their journey to their son's village, Axl and Beatrice must be ferried to an island in two separate boats, once the ferryman has established that their love is true, by questioning them separately. They travel together and yet constantly live in the fear that once they have remembered their past, their love may no longer endure the test of time. Axl and Beatrice are constantly worried about being separated: "Promise, princess, you'll not forget what you feel in your heart for me at this moment. For what good's a memory returning from the mist if it's only to push away another? Will you promise me, princess? Promise to keep what you feel for me this moment always in your heart, no matter what you see once the mist's gone" (Ishiguro 2015, 294).

The couple fails the final test of Charon and *The Buried Giant* ends with the same nostalgic air of loss as most of Ishiguro's other novels.

Perhaps one of the most powerful metaphors throughout Ishiguro's fiction, which embodies a painful past that can still make its way into the present, is the metaphor of wounds. Whatever happened in the past can still be felt in the present, whether or not we remember it for what it was. Essentially, wounds are defining for the identity of several characters in Ishiguro's fiction. Wounds can be both painful and helpful, as they help characters achieve goals in the present. Edwin's wound, which was caused by a dragon, leads Wistan and the other characters to Querig the she-dragon, so that they can restore everyone's memory: "Who knows how he met with a dragon, but a dragon's bite it is, and now the desire will be rising in his blood to seek congress with a she-dragon. And in turn, any she-dragon near enough to scent him will come seeking him. This is why Master Wistan is so fond of his protégé, sir. He believes Master Edwin will lead him to Querig" (Ishiguro 2015, 199).

Thus, Edwin's wound is what guides the characters and facilitates their journey. The wound connects present and past.

Beatrice's painful foot, a variation of the wound metaphor, leads the characters to the monastery to seek the monks' advice and is supposedly caused by "darkness," standing for the superstitious, prescientific communities that metaphorically took away Axl and Beatrice's candle: "It wasn't right for them. To take away our candle. . . . I was remembering about it, Axl. And I was thinking maybe it's because of our lack of a candle I first took this pain I now have" (Ishiguro 2015, 115).

Father Jonus's self-inflicted wounds are also reminiscent of a primitive take on religion, whereby exposing one's body to the wild birds could lead to God's forgiveness. This seems to be at least what the abbot recommends the monks do, while "others of our view will say it's time to stop. That no forgiveness awaits us at the end of this path. That we must uncover what's been hidden and face the past" (Ishiguro 2015, 174).

In *Never Let Me Go*, the characters' entire identities are woundlike, for their ultimate goal is to donate their vital organs. This reality is never questioned, the characters never directly express regret or pain about it. Once asked in an interview about why the characters in *Never Let Me Go* don't try to escape, Ishiguro replies that he is not interested in that at all. He wants to explore what happens to characters who manage to stay and go on with their lives. "I was never interested in looking at that story of raved slaves who rebelled and escaped . . . I'm fascinated by the extent to which people don't run away. . . . That is the remarkable fact, how much we accept" (Ishiguro 2010).

Individual failure—at love, at being happy, at togetherness—is the space in which Ishiguro's stories unfold.

Duty, Misplaced Loyalty and Failure

FACING THE past and assuming responsibility for a questionable history is the underlying theme of both *The Buried Giant* and *The Remains of the Day*. In *The Buried Giant*, the past makes its way into the present through Gawain, the quixotic knight with a hidden agenda to protect the dragon. Self-deprecating and awkward, with a high sense of duty to King Arthur, Gawain describes himself as harmless, yet dedicated to his cause: "Armed, it's true, but come closer and you'll see I'm just a whiskery old fool. This sword and armour I carry only out of duty to my king, the great and beloved Arthur" (Ishiguro 2015, 118).

With his armor "frayed and rusted, though no doubt he had done all he could to preserve" (Ishiguro 2015, 119), Gawain is the embodiment of a past that is no longer relevant for the present. He is the only character who seems to remember past deeds, like Axl's cursing Arthur before his knights. Thus it is impossible not to wonder: had the other characters been able to remember the past, would they all be Gawains?

As for Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro says in an interview that "we're all like butlers" (Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda 1991, 140), which is significant in the *his story/ history* dichotomy: by telling his story of misplaced loyalty and professional failure he tells the story of a backward-looking nation, still caught in a post-imperial nostalgia. Currently employed by a forward-looking American, Mr. Farraday, Stevens reminisces about his previous employer from before World War II, Lord Darlington, a sympathizer of Hitler. His story is about what it means to be a *great* butler in *Great* Britain.

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only menservants. I tend to believe this is true. Con-

tinentials are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of. . . . We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman. (Ishiguro 1989, 44)

Caught between past and present, idealizing the former while trying to come to terms with the latter, Stevens uses history to rationalize his ideals: “Each of us harboured the desire to make our own small contribution to the creation of a better world, and saw that, as professionals, the surest means of doing so would be to serve the great gentlemen of our times in whose hands civilization had been entrusted” (Ishiguro 1989, 122).

Through Stevens, Ishiguro deconstructs the grand historical narrative of a national identity that is rooted in a past which is no longer relevant today.

Using the past to make sense of the present is what all three novels have in common. Axl and Beatrice cannot remember the past, but live in constant fear of what might happen if they remembered, while at the same time fighting the amnesia-inducing mist. Stevens embodies an entire backward-looking nation that must overcome its nostalgia in order to deal with the present. Kath and Tommy’s identities as carer and donor are rooted in their childhood and adolescence and their history and fates are never questioned. They all fail, end up lonely or die, and they all do so in the shadow of a past that cannot be linearly integrated into the present. It cannot be accepted (Stevens), questioned (Kath and Tommy), or even remembered (Axl and Beatrice). The past is unreliable, displaced and elusive. The past is just a pretext for analyzing failure. One cannot come to terms with the past.

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Abstract

A Past Best Forgotten: Histories and Stories in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*

Memory is fundamental to Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction. The present paper analyses how the past makes its way into the present in *The Buried Giant*, *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*. To different degrees, all three novels address the issue of personal identity as reliant on a larger context. Personal stories are written against the wider historical background that the characters are part of. Eventual failure, loss or even death are significant from a postmodern view on history and time, namely, that there is no grand historical narrative that is credible, reliable or that can act as the center to which characters can return and make sense of their personal stories.

Keywords

history, story, postmodernism, identity, failure