

Generally we approach works of fiction with certain expectations even though we can't always predict the events. Pleasure in reading, it can be argued, hinges upon the satisfaction of these expectations. Haruki Murakami, however, is difficult to categorise and, as a result, the reader is usually not sure what to expect from his works, except perhaps a vague sense of existential suffering, a protean reality, fickle extramarital affairs, vanishing cats, intimate conversations about music, ambiguous dreams, and a plethora of interesting characters.

Nevertheless, Murakami's works can be loosely divided into two categories: first, there are surreal works, such as *Kafka on the Shore*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *1Q84*, that play with the idea of multiple realities and supernatural beings. Then there is

AN UNBEARABLE LONELINESS

AMMARA KHAN

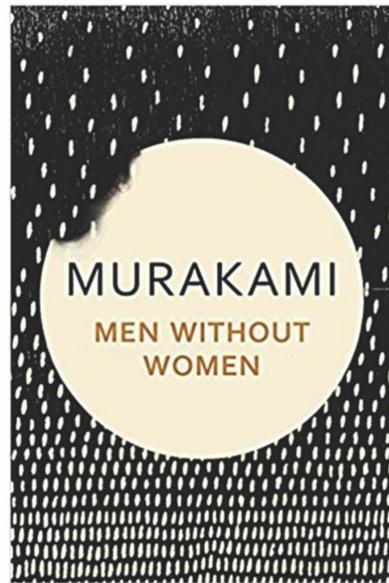
Norwegian Wood that somewhat adheres to the realistic conventions of fiction. *Men Without Women*, Murakami's first short story collection in over a decade, and undoubtedly among his best, falls in the latter category.

In today's world of ultra-individualism, frantic pace, and the desire for instant gratification, emotional vulnerability is denigrated as not just undesirable, but extremely risky. The characters in this collection are all lonely souls who choose not to completely open up to the women they love, and as a result, end up as 'men without women.'

'Drive My Car', the first story, is narrated by Kafuku, a reasonably well-known actor. As a result of a minor accident, he can no longer drive, so he hires a young, brusque girl called Misaki Watari who smokes like a chimney and tends to shoot from the hip on the rare occasions that she talks. While Misaki drives him in his yellow Saab 900 convertible (Murakami never omits specifications of the cars and trains in his works), Kafuku slowly starts to open up to her about his past. Shortly before his wife died of cancer, he found out that she had been cheating on him. After her death he struck up a friendship with her lover in order to understand why she chose him over Kafuku, but felt only tormented in his presence. Despite the difference in the nature of their relationship with her, neither man can get over his loss.

The men in this book are often troubled by things they didn't have the courage to do; Kafuku's biggest regret is that he didn't confront his wife when she was alive: "The question never ventured, the answer never proffered." A typical Murakami man, Kafuku finds escape in his work as performing allows him to be someone other than himself, "[b]ut the self that one returned to was never exactly the same as the self that one left behind."

The two main characters in 'Yesterday' go one step ahead and acquire different dialects to become different persons, "because in the final analysis, the language we speak constitutes who we are as people." Kitaru masters the Kansai dialect to such perfection that people think he is from Kansai even though he was raised in Tokyo. Tanimura, on the other hand, is from Kansai but wants to be accepted in Tokyo; he painstakingly learns the Tokyo dialect so that nobody should be able to detect his Kansai origins.



These men are seeking something, but they don't always realise what it is: "That's what we all do: endlessly take the long way around." Dr Tokai in 'An Independent Organ' used to live a surprisingly artificial life where "[w]hat his time spent with women offered was the opportunity to be embraced by reality, on the one hand, while negating it entirely on the other." The deep sense of loss after he loses the woman he loves is suffocating, but also leads him to wonder who he really is.

In 'Scheherazade', Habara wishes to leave his self behind and inhabit another time or space. Like the other men, he feels isolated from the world: "I am not stranded on a desert island. No, he thought, I am a desert island." He finds escape in the stories told by the woman who takes care of his provisions and is also his sexual partner. She tells him incredible stories, but what does it matter whether they are fabrications or truth as long as they help him forget who he is? He doesn't love her and the intimacy is so closely linked with storytelling that he isn't sure where one ends and the other begins.

Action for Murakami is not a sequence of external events; it's often internal to the subconscious. By that I

BOOK REVIEW |

do not refer to a character's reflection on their life that eventually leads to self-discovery, but an autonomous representation of existence on a subconscious level. 'Kino' focuses on the inner turmoil of Kino after he finds out his wife is having an affair with his friend, but he feels no anger or bitterness towards her. He realises that all his life he has never really felt any emotions: "Happiness? He wasn't even sure what that meant. He didn't have a clear sense, either, of emotions like pain or anger, disappointment or resignation, and how they were supposed to feel." He feels stuck in a limbo, unable to find an anchor in either the external or the internal world as "the movement of time seemed not to be fixed properly. The bloody weight of desire and the rusty anchor of remorse were blocking its normal flow. Time was not an arrow flying in a straight line."

The stories get progressively darker and more powerful. "He woke to discover that he had undergone a metamorphosis and become Gregor Samsa." Thus starts 'Samsa in Love'—Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* in reverse. Murakami brings into question ideas of what it means to be a human being by revealing how it would feel for something to be suddenly trapped in a human body with its "ravenous desire". Samsa wishes he had been turned into a fish or sunflower so that he could have spent his life in peace rather than living the perilous life of a human being.

'Men Without Women', the last story, is a philosophical meditation on what it means to be so: "Suddenly one day you become Men Without Women. That day comes to you completely out of the blue,

without the faintest of warnings or hints beforehand. No premonitions or foreboding, no knocks or clearing of throats... But by then here is no going back. Once you go round that bend, that is the only world you can possibly inhabit. In that world you are called 'Men Without Women'. Always a relentlessly frigid plural." Once you've become that, "loneliness seeps deep down inside your body, like a red wine stain on a pastel carpet. No matter how many home economics books you study, getting rid of that stain isn't easy. The stain might fade a bit over time, but it will still remain, as a stain, until the day you draw your final breath."

Loneliness looms over these protagonists who seem to be waiting for something or someone. Murakami's exploration of solitude and emptiness has allowed him to establish a different understanding of life. Shared life, it seems, is infinitely better than being alone, "but the proposition that we can look into another person's heart with perfect clarity strikes me as a fool's game." In typical Murakami fashion we are led to believe that no matter how harrowing it is to be alone, "[i]f we hope to truly see another person, we have to start by looking within ourselves."

Ammara Khan is an Ankara-based freelance writer

PERSPECTIVE |

Courtesy of studying and working in different countries, the vast majority of my half-a-decade long marriage has been long distance. Although the husband and I are deliriously happy with each other (thank God!), our unique version of "happily ever apart" is unfathomable to most people. "How do you do it?" frequently ask my bewildered friends and foes. This article, which chronicles my Facebook posts as evidence, is my response.

Step 1: Adapt to the wedded state

This is much harder than it looks. Consider this post from the early days of my married life:

Still getting used to being married. Was getting into the car today, saw the husband hurrying over to my side. Wondering what he wanted, I scrambled out of the car and asked, "Has something happened?" He said, "No, I came to close your door." I said, "Oh. Oops. Wait." Then I scrambled back into the car with the grace of a platypus. Chivalry is so wasted on me.

Step 2: Marry a patient man, buy him a dark punjabi

Went to a wedding with the husband for the first time. Accidentally poured an entire glass of cola on his brand-new very cool punjabi. He smiled. This marriage thing is more complicated than it looks.

Dark colours stain less. Patience is also indispensable, as this article amply illustrates.

Step 3: Communicate, communicate, communicate

Communication is critical. On the positive side, successful long distance veterans become veritable experts at tête-à-tête. On the negative side:

Husband on the phone: "All right, I have to say salam. I'm off to the library." Husband an hour later, still on the phone: "Uhhh salam?"

This is what a long distance marriage involves—long debriefs on the phone where the poor man is treated to a blow-by-blow account of my singularly boring day. To spice things up, I even throw in obscure questions to check if he's *really* paying attention.

Step 4: Terminate time zones

Since we traipse across the world, the husband and I regularly inhabit radically different time zones. Over the years, we've simply learnt to ignore them:

My thesis has been written, printed, bound and submitted. My veins have coffee flowing through them. Woke the husband up to tell him the good news. Sharing life's triumphs with the spouse sounds romantic in theory. Over long distances though, this means being forced awake at the crack of dawn.

In fact, we've also perfected the art of Whatsapping—we keep it on even when one is awake and the other asleep. This is "companionable silence" in the modern marriage.

SURVIVING OUR LONG DISTANCE MARRIAGE

NABILA IDRIS

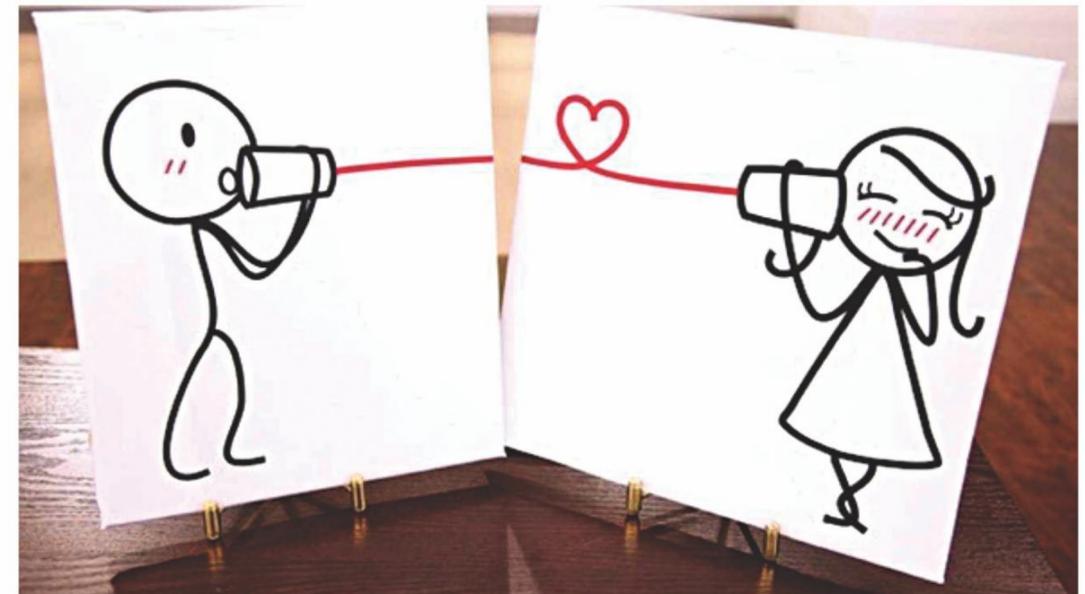


PHOTO: COURTESY

Step 5: Jettison the jet lag

The problem with jet lag is it happens only to the spouse who's travelled. So while I am awake and antsy for deep philosophical exchanges, the husband is woefully asleep. I have, however, perfected an empirically-tested solution that I rolled out one sleepless night to great success:

Me (conversationally): "What if I'm killed by a serial killer and, since we live alone, you're the most likely suspect?"

Husband (asleep): "What?"

Me: "You should always have an alibi."

Husband (mumbles): "What are you talking about?"

Me: "Haven't you thought about this?"

Husband (turns away sniggering): "You watch too much *Criminal Minds*."

Very long pregnant pause.

Husband (reluctantly, but unable to contain his curiosity): "What if I'm killed by a serial killer?"

Me: "I'm glad you asked. Here's my plan..."

Thus ended his sleep.

Step 6: Share interests

Since we're both unrepentant nerds, the husband has at times done classes with his Skype conveniently on, allowing me to listen in on very interesting lectures on

post-colonialism. In turn, I have reverently replaced regular romance with irregular interests:

After a particularly fascinating class on South-South cooperation, I immediately thought, "I have to share this with the husband." Coz this is the extent of my romantic repertoire—I recycle lectures while he listens patiently... interrupting only with insightful questions that engage with the core content.

Whilst sharing interests is essential, sharing food is optional at best:

Bought some snacks for the husband. Then uhhh finished most of it before he could uhhh eat any. He's now negotiating with me for the remainder, "This one's mine, right? I get to have this one?" This sharing aspect of marriage is seriously overrated. My eclairs are mine, your eclairs are mine, all eclairs are mine. Thanks.

Step 7: Be romantic...

A successful marriage craves creativity. With the husband and I anchored to different continents, you'd think going on dates would be difficult. NOT SO. Across the ocean, we keep Skype on and watch the same movie on our laptops. I know this *sounds* very sad, but if you keep the mute button on, it works out fine. (Hey, no one said long distance was fun, okay?)

Step 8: ...but be realistic too

Romance per se doesn't always fly in our household:

Yesterday we walked past a beautiful blue lagoon. I dreamily said, "I could just jump in these waters. It looks so inviting." The husband interrupted me with his shrill voice of reason, "Can you swim?" "N...o," I answered. The traitor guffawed in response.

Step 9: Crucially, be an exceptionally nice human being

This one's rather non-negotiable. Consider, for instance, the time the husband made fried rice:

On the rare occasions we're in the same country, we cook together—one cooks, the other plays assistant. Recently I taught him to make fried rice, and he made some last night. It was delicious, better than mine. I asked, "How is your fried rice better than mine? I taught you!" He said, "I have a better assistant than you do."

On second thought, eight steps seem unnecessarily complicated to make long distance marriage work. Just the last step alone should suffice.

Nabila Idris is a PhD student. Across the Atlantic, so is her husband. They do not recommend long distance marriage except as the very last resort.