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Klara and the Sun

About Kazuo Ishiguro

from www.penguinrandomhouse.com

KAZUO ISHIGURO was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954 and moved to Britain at the age of five. His eight previous works of fiction have earned him many honors around the world, including the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Booker Prize. His work has been translated into over fifty languages, and *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, both made into acclaimed films, have each sold more than 2 million copies. He was given a knighthood in 2018 for Services to Literature. He also holds the decorations of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from France and the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star from Japan.

About the book

from www.penguinrandomhouse.com

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • Once in a great while, a book comes along that changes our view of the world. This magnificent novel from the Nobel laureate and author of *Never Let Me Go* is “an intriguing take on how artificial intelligence might play a role in our futures ... a poignant meditation on love and loneliness” (The Associated Press). • A GOOD MORNING AMERICA Book Club Pick!

Here is the story of Klara, an Artificial Friend with outstanding observational qualities, who, from her place in the store, watches carefully the behavior of those who come in to browse, and of those who pass on the street outside. She remains hopeful that a customer will soon choose her. *Klara and the Sun* is a thrilling book that offers a look at our changing world through the eyes of an unforgettable narrator, and one that explores the fundamental question: what does it mean to love?

Reviews

The New Republic
newrepublic.com

Reviewer: Rumaan Alam

Kazuo Ishiguro's Deceptively Simple Story of AI

Why does "Klara and the Sun" serve up its big questions so explicitly?

The titular narrator of *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro's new novel, is a robot. This isn't spoiler—this revelation comes early in the book. Klara is an Artificial Friend, a lifelike but nevertheless mechanical companion for children: amalgam of sibling, plaything, and nursemaid. When we meet her, she's inventory in a showroom. We glean, from her interactions with her fellow wares, that AFs mimic being male or female, that they have names (bestowed by their manufacturer? it's unclear) and personalities, thoughts, an interior self. There's an AF called Rosa, whom Klara considers dim ("She could fail to notice so much, and even when I pointed something out to her, she'd still not see what was special or interesting about it."), and one called Rex, who teases Klara.

The Artificial Friends are powered by the sun, an almost divine presence for them—the text renders it as "the Sun," as the faithful speak of God. "An AF would feel himself growing lethargic after a few hours away from the Sun, and start to worry there was something wrong with him," Klara tells us, "that he had some fault unique to him and that if it became known, he'd never find a home." It's a triumph when Klara earns a spot in the store's windows: She can bask in the light, observe the world she's curious about ("I was free to see, close up and whole, so many things I'd seen before only as corners and edges"), and increase her odds of being bought.

Most of Ishiguro's novels are slender books that are more complicated than they at first seem; *Klara and the Sun* is by contrast more simple than it seems, less novel than parable. Though much is familiar here—the restrained language, the under-stated first-person narration—the new book is much more overt than its predecessors about its concerns. Ishiguro's 1989 novel *The Remains of the Day* unspools over a few days in the 1950s, as a butler reflects on his years of service in a grand household, at once taxonomy of English life and indictment of the nation. In *Never Let Me Go*, the narrator, Kathy—31 but girlish and naïve—seems to be telling the tale of her youth at boarding school. Her voice is intimate and casual, her story derailed by reminiscences and asides. At some point, it's clear that the youth Kathy is remembering wasn't spent at a school but an institution, and that she and her chums aren't students but clones, bred to be harvested for parts, destined to die (to "complete," in the book's chilling parlance) by young adulthood. These works are attentive to the rewards of story (What will happen to the butler on his road trip? Who are these schoolchildren really?), and they offer something deeper—call it philosophy. Ishiguro usually, wisely, leaves this up to the reader. We connect the dots between a butler's blind obedience and the rise of fascism; Kathy's tale challenges our ideas about the sanctity of life itself.

In *Klara and the Sun*, characters do this work for the reader. Klara inspires the humans in the book to muse about whether science can transcend death. Her owner grapples with the ramifications of choosing to have her own children genetically modified in order to enhance their potential. That this novel serves up these bigger questions so explicitly feels at first like a miscalculation, or a flaw in the narrative design, which locks us in Klara's perspective. But I don't think Klara aims to wrestle with these questions at all. Klara is a machine, but she's also a contrivance, the perfect metaphor for parenthood.

Klara's story begins when a girl called Josie spies her through the window. She eventually returns, with her mother in tow. Klara becomes part of their small household—Josie, her mother, and the domestic to whom Klara refers as Melania Housekeeper, who is cool to the robot. Her hostility, Klara later realizes, "had to do with her larger fears concerning what might be happening around Josie." The girl is not well, and her illness seems to be a consequence of her having been "lifted." This is the process (perhaps surgical; it's never satisfactorily explained) by which humans can increase their intelligence. Josie's friend, Rick, worries that he might not get into a good college; he himself is "unlifted."

Most of Ishiguro's slender books are more complicated than they seem; *Klara and the Sun* is by contrast more simple than it seems.

Other secrets come to light, notably that Josie once had a sister, Sal, who died as a result of complications from having been lifted. When Josie is too ill to accompany her mother, Chrissie (always simply "the Mother"), on a day trip, Klara goes with her instead. The Mother confesses she misses her daughter's company, but allows, "I don't feel quite so bad because you're here."

Gradually, we come to understand that Klara is not a replacement for Sal but an insurance policy against the loss of Josie. Fearing for the life of her surviving child, the Mother has enlisted a scientist named Capaldi to develop an artificial version of Josie. Klara's task isn't to keep the girl company; it's to learn her mannerisms, her voice, her essence. If the girl dies, Klara's artificial psyche will be transferred into a body that Capaldi has built to look exactly like Josie. "You're not being required simply to mimic Josie's outward behavior. You're being asked to continue her for Chrissie. And for everyone who loves Josie," the scientist explains.

Klara's abilities are a marvel, but she, like the reader, barely understands what's going on. Whereas the revelation in *Never Let Me Go* that Kathy is a clone inspires deeper horror, neither Klara nor the reader can manage a feeling about the news that Klara might be asked to "continue" Josie. Capaldi muses about it with the remove of a scientist:

Our generation still carry the old feelings. A part of us refuses to let go. The part that wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something that's unique and won't transfer. But there's nothing like that, we know that now.

The novel wants to establish Klara as a counterargument to this. She's not even alive, but contains something "unreachable." She has a kind of innate religious feeling. Fearing Josie's death, she goes to a barn to pray for her. ("I'd started to wonder if the Sun's resting place really

was inside the barn itself.”) In this sacred space, “filled with orange light” and “particles of hay drifting in the air,” Klara asks the Sun to spare Josie’s life, sounding like any supplicant: “I understand how forward and rude I’ve been to come here. The Sun has every right to be angry, and I fully understand your refusal even to consider my request.” She makes a bargain: For the Sun’s intercession, she’ll undertake an act of worship, in which she’ll risk her own existence (I almost said life).

Thus ensues the book’s most dramatic moment, in which Klara enlists Josie’s until-then absentee father in a conspiracy that is convoluted and not altogether persuasive. We have access only to Klara, so can’t comprehend whether her faith in the Sun’s powers is unique to her or common to all AFs. The mechanics of the deal she strikes feel, well, mechanical, just as she does.

Sci-fi milieu notwithstanding, Klara reminded me more of *Remains than Never Let Me Go*, because, in that earlier book, the narrator too is almost inhuman. Stevens is dutiful above all else, choosing his vocation over love, both romantic and filial. The reader sees the man as he cannot see himself. Like Stevens, Klara can’t comprehend love. She watches Josie and her father meet after a period apart:

Then he looked away and closed his eyes, letting his cheek rest against the top of her head. They stayed like that for a time, keeping very still, not even rocking slowly the way the Mother and Josie did sometimes during their morning farewells.

Klara’s cool remove from human emotion isn’t a shortcoming but a function of her being a machine. We pity Stevens but can never quite muster the same for Klara. Her lack of interiority will prevent some readers from engaging with the book; those who want a novel that makes them feel will be stymied by emotion’s absence. Accustomed to negotiating with Ishiguro’s narrators, I kept trying to see past Klara and into the world of the book. But the narrative gives Klara no reason to provide the exposition we want: what year it is, what nation we are in (there are clues that it’s the United States, new territory for an Ishiguro novel), the specifics that clarify this invented world to be a version of our own—the very promise of science fiction.

Klara reminded me less of any previous Ishiguro work than of Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*, a book for children in which a tree so loves a boy that she allows him to destroy her altogether. It’s a strange work and a polarizing one—some see it posit parenthood (maternity, really, as the tree is referred to as “she”) as ideally selfless, some see it as arguing that humanity is fundamentally selfish.

Klara is as vigilant as a parent with a newborn: “I looked over to Josie and could tell from her posture and her breathing that she wasn’t sleeping in her usual way.” When Klara is still new to the household, Josie hosts a party. The girl’s friends ask the robot to do tricks (sing the scales, show off your memory), but Klara is unable to impress. Like a loyal dog, she won’t follow the commands of anyone other than Josie. The girl later laments that her illness must make her bad company, testing the limits of Klara’s unconditional love. Mustn’t Klara want a more exciting friend? “I’ve never wished such a thing,” Klara tells her, like any good parent. “It was my wish to be Josie’s AF. And the wish came true.”

Late in the story, it seems Josie might die. She offers a message to her friend Rick, who passes it on to the Mother:

She says that no matter what happens now, never mind how it plays out, she loves you and will always love you. She's very grateful you're her mother and she never even once wished for any other.

It would be heartbreaking that she doesn't offer a similar message for Klara, but a robot doesn't have a heart. Klara turns to the Sun once more, in what can only be described as prayer. The novel's curiosity about faith feels as cursory as its interest in science; it's just a position that Klara represents. Rick later concedes that the robot's prayers might have something to do with Josie's miraculous recovery, but the book has no conviction about religion beyond this "maybe."

What we do know, though, is that children grow, and Josie outgrows her AF. "I understood that my presence wasn't appropriate as it once had been," Klara tells us, as she explains how she comes to take up residence in a utility room. Josie heads off into adulthood with this farewell: "I guess you may not be here when I get back. You've been just great, Klara."

The robot is consigned to the scrap heap, where she considers how blessed her existence has been. "The Sun was very kind to me. He was always kind to me from the start. But when I was with Josie, once, he was particularly kind." It echoes Shel Silverstein's tree, stripped of her apples, her boughs, her trunk by the boy she so loves; finally, mere stump, she offers him a place to sit. "And the tree was happy."

Ishiguro is unsentimental—indeed, one of the prevailing criticisms of him is that he's too cold, his novels overly designed, his language detached. (Some of the worst writing on Ishiguro ascribes this to his being Japanese, overlooking that he's lived in England since he was a small child.) In most hands, this business of the mother-figure who sacrifices all for a child would be mawkish. Here it barely seems like metaphor. Every parent has at times felt like an automaton. Every parent has pleaded with some deity for the safety of their child. Every parent is aware of their own, inevitable obsolescence. And no child can offer more than Josie's glib goodbye, though perhaps Ishiguro wants to; the book is dedicated to his mother.

Reviews

NPR

npr.org

Reviewer: Maureen Corrigan

'Klara And The Sun' Is A Masterpiece About Life, Love And Mortality

This is unbearable.

I wrote that one-sentence review to myself about half-way through reading Klara and the Sun, Kazuo Ishiguro's just published eighth novel.

Lest you think that doesn't sound like much of an enticement, know that I've probably written something like that sentence about every Ishiguro novel I've read. He is the master of slowly deepening our awareness of human failing, fragility and the inevitability of death — all that, even as he deepens our awareness of what temporary magic it is to be alive in the first place.

Like a medieval pilgrim walking a cathedral labyrinth in meditation, Ishiguro keeps pacing his way through these big existential themes in his fiction. Klara and the Sun is yet another return pilgrimage and it's one of the most affecting and profound novels Ishiguro has written.

The story is set in a United States of the near future, a place riven by tribal loyalties and fascist political movements. Technology has rendered many people "postemployed" and created a blunt caste system where the so-called "lifted" are on top. That's the wide-focus social backdrop of this novel; but most of the time, we're seeing things through the narrow view of Klara, our first-person narrator.

When we meet her, Klara is on display in a department store window: She's an AF or "Artificial Friend." To call her a robot diminishes her, because Klara, as the store manager says in a sales pitch, has an "appetite for observing and learning ... [and] has the most sophisticated understanding of any AF in this store."

The AFs have been designed as companions for the children of this brave new world who, for some reason, don't go out much. One day, a pale, thin teenager named Josie comes into the store with her mother, a woman who, Klara notices, carries an "angry exhaustion" in her eyes. We soon learn the mother's expression is connected to a mysterious illness that's weakening Josie. Immediately drawn to Klara, Josie chooses her to be her best friend, and Klara is packed up and sent to Josie's house.

Loneliness is one of the signature emotions that Ishiguro's novels fathom, and in her new position, Klara has many opportunities to observe the strategies that humans devise to fight off loneliness and conceal vulnerability. Here, she describes a contrived gathering of teenagers, called an "interaction" at Josie's house. Klara is at first puzzled by the meanness of the kids including, uncharacteristically, Josie. Then, slowly, Klara grasps that:

They fear loneliness and that's why they behave as they do ...

I'd begun to understand also that ... people often felt the need to prepare a side of themselves to display to passers-by — as they might in a store window — and that such a display needn't be taken so seriously once the moment had passed.

Klara's voice, her sensibility — if you can say that of an Artificial Friend — is pure and devoted, a little like a service dog. The question of whether Klara, indeed, has a "sensibility" is a crucial one here, as it was in Ishiguro's 2005 novel, *Never Let Me Go* where the young female narrator is a clone. Klara is such a compelling presence that I think most readers of this novel will say, yes, she's a sentient being. But, what does our intense connection to an Artificial Friend do to the belief that, as one character puts it, there's "something unreachable inside each of us [human beings]. Something that's unique and won't transfer."

Without question, Klara certainly seems capable of loving. In the unbearable sections of this novel I referenced earlier, Josie grows weaker and Klara, who's herself solar-powered, beseeches the "kindly" Sun for "special nourishment" for Josie and, then, bravely sets out to make an offering to the Sun. Klara's misperception of the Sun as a caring deity calls to question our own limited human understanding of, well, everything. Like Klara, who sees the world through grids that sometimes go haywire, we humans only see through a glass, darkly.

But great artists, like Ishiguro, are distinguished by their more expansive vision. I know that's something of an old-fashioned conceit, as is the word, "masterpiece"; nevertheless, I'll go for broke and call Klara and the Sun a masterpiece that will make you think about life, mortality, the saving grace of love: in short, the all of it.

Interview

The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com

by Mary Laura Philpot

Kazuo Ishiguro: 'Some awful things have happened in the last year . . . but these are not uninteresting times'

(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

With his eighth novel, “Klara and the Sun,” Kazuo Ishiguro, the Nobel Prize winner best known for “Remains of the Day” and “Never Let Me Go,” has another bestseller. This tale about a solar-powered “artificial friend” created to assuage the loneliness of a human teenager delves into profound aspects of the human experience: our instinct to protect and care for our loved ones, our need to be seen and understood, our poignant awareness of mortality. It’s a fable-like, moving read that would make fruitful fodder for book club discussions.

From his home in London, Ishiguro talked about the novel, the Nobel, parenthood, how he managed to stay afloat during the pandemic and more.

Q: Several of your previous books were on my mind as I read “Klara and the Sun.” It struck me that the deep need to prove our right to exist — to prove that we deserve to occupy whatever space we occupy, that our existence has had a purpose and has not been wasted — seems to be at the heart of so much of your writing. I thought about the butler in “Remains of the Day.” I thought about the clones in “Never Let Me Go.” The artificial friend, Klara. Why do you think you’ve returned so often to that idea? Or I guess I should first ask, do you think you’re returning again and again to that idea?

A: Yeah. I think you’re absolutely right. I come back to it from perhaps different angles. It’s not just what interests me about human beings; it’s what I admire about them, even when they go wrong. It’s what I love about human beings. We’re not like cows or sheep or whatever. We’re not content just to feed ourselves and reproduce and then die. We’ve got to keep asking ourselves, “Have I made a contribution? Have I been a good . . . ?” Even if I’m a criminal, I’d ask myself, “Have I been a good criminal? Have I been loyal to my gang members?” It’s just hard-wired into human beings. We want to say that we did it well, not just in terms of career, but in terms of being a parent or being a sibling or being a friend or being a spouse.

Q: The juxtaposition of technology and living beings — having this machine who is trying to build an accurate understanding of the natural world and of human society — must have been such a ripe situation for storytelling. Had the advances in artificial intelligence been on your mind in recent years? And is technology something that you fear or celebrate — or both?

A: Both, I think. I had been quite immersed in reading and actually talking about things like AI and also gene technology. I was very interested in these areas for a number of years, without really thinking I'd write a book about it or that it would actually turn up in any form in any of my novels. I do have fears about it, but . . . I think it does open up amazing things for us, particularly in terms of health care. Of course there are enormous dangers, and so as a society we have to actually reorganize ourselves so that we can benefit from these things and not have these things destroy our civilization.

Q: Parenthood is one of the central relationships in “Klara and the Sun.” How has fatherhood shaped you as a writer?

A: I can't imagine what kind of person or what kind of writer I'd be if I hadn't experienced parenthood. Your perspective shifts. Emotionally, intellectually, you look at the world differently. I think your perspective becomes longer as well. You're not just looking at things in your own lifetime. You see things in terms of your child's lifetime, your grandchildren's lifetime, your great grandchildren's lifetime. The way you look at life, our existence, everything seems to change. And it changes at that kind of empathetic, emotional level. Occasionally I come across writers who say if you have children it messes up your career. I think this is a profound mistake, unless you think a writing career is just about sitting down and producing a certain quantity of writing.

Q: They do get in the way of your office hours sometimes.

A: [Laughs] Artistic endeavor is about trying to experience life and reflect life. I'm not saying that writers who don't have children don't write profound books. We have many, many examples of this. I don't think it's something a writer should try to avoid because they think it's not good for their career.

Q: In your Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2017, you spoke of the prize as an indication that one has “made a significant contribution to our common human endeavor.” What is that endeavor?

A: Since being given this huge honor — some people think this is the ultimate honor across all the fields of endeavor — I've been trying to figure out whether not just I, but whether the activity of literature is worthy of this kind of honor alongside medicine, physics, chemistry, and of course, peace. There's an economics prize now as well that's been added in modern times.

I want to say, of course literature is just as important, but this is something in the dead of night I kind of worry about. Why? You take away medicine, we've got real problems. You take away the sciences, you take away peace. . . . Literature, does it deserve to be up there? Do I deserve to represent it? I've been saying for years, if you take away reading, take away literature, you take away something very, very important in the way we human beings communicate with each other. It's not enough just to have knowledge of facts. We've got to somehow be able to communicate our feelings and our emotions. We've got to be able to tell each other what it feels like to be in different kinds of situations. Otherwise, we don't know what to do with our knowledge.

When we create stories for movies or just stories that we tell each other when we meet, this is something very, very fundamental. Take that away, some bad things are going to happen. We're just going to end up profoundly lonely and not be able to function as a civilization.

Q: When you wake up in the morning and you feel the first spark of motivation to start your day, what is it that's motivating you?

A: Like everybody, I've been missing company because of the pandemic and so on. Often I would have been getting up looking forward to some event, I'd be seeing somebody I want to see. I love conversations with strangers, with old friends, with members of my family. A conversation is something that always excites me because it's always going to open up something new. We have had a lot to think about recently, not just about the pandemic, but about where we're going as a society in the Western world. We've had many, many challenging things, and some of that you might think is depressing, but — I hate to say this, it feels in rather bad taste — but that's kind of what gets me up in the morning. I think, "I'm going to find out more about this. I'm reading this, and this book is fascinating, and these ideas here are fascinating." Some awful things have happened in the last year or so, and people have lost a lot of loved ones, but these are not uninteresting times.

Discussion Questions

from audiobooks.com

1. In *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro imagines not a world where AI rebellion is inevitable, as so many science fiction novels and movies have warned, but rather that it is not and may never be. What kind of threat do you think he is highlighting, instead, with the placid servitude and expendability of Klara and other AFs (Artificial Friends)?
2. Ishiguro keeps the narrative tightly constrained to Klara's point of view. What do her naiveté and unique observations add to the story?
3. Discuss how the theme of loneliness comes up in the story and some of the ways AFs both combat and exacerbate loneliness.
4. What are your thoughts on the society Ishiguro created in which "lifted" children are afforded better opportunities and, in turn, a vastly different lifestyle than those who aren't "lifted?" How does this compare with the world we currently live in?
5. During Josie's interaction meeting when the boys want to throw Klara around to test her coordination, one of the girls says it's "evil" and "nasty" to handle an AF that way. What did you make of the children's different sentiments toward AFs? What about Klara's response, or, rather, lack thereof?
6. What did you make of Klara's visit to Morgan's Falls with the Mother? Did it change your opinion of either of them?
7. If things had gone differently and Josie's parents carried through with their plan, do you think either of them could ever have accepted Klara as Josie's replacement?

8. If it came to it, is it something you would ever consider doing?
9. Why, in the end, do you think Ishiguro chose for Josie to recover from her illness?
10. What do you think Ishiguro is saying about the uniqueness of humans? What about robots? Does he offer any definitive conclusions?