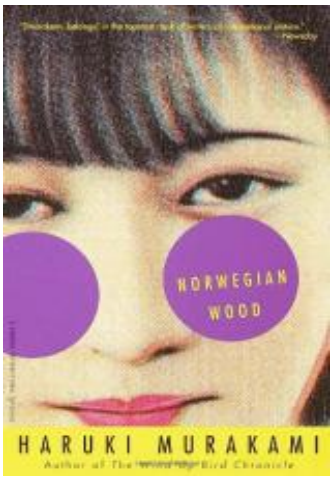
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Norwegian Wood

by Haruki Murakami



About the Book

This stunning and elegiac novel by the author of the internationally acclaimed **Wind-Up Bird Chronicle** has sold over 4 million copies in Japan and is now available to American audiences for the first time. It is sure to be a literary event.

Toru, a quiet and preternaturally serious young college student in Tokyo, is devoted to Naoko, a beautiful and introspective young woman, but their mutual passion is marked by the tragic death of their best friend years before. Toru begins to adapt to campus life and the loneliness and isolation he faces there, but Naoko finds the pressures and responsibilities of life unbearable. As she retreats further into her own world, Toru finds himself reaching out to others and drawn to a fiercely independent and sexually liberated young woman.

A poignant story of one college student's romantic coming-of-age,**Norwegian Wood** takes us to that distant place of a young man's first, hopeless, and heroic love.

Discussion Guide

1. When Watanabe arrives in Hamburg and hears the song "Norwegian Wood," memories of a scene with Naoko from eighteen years before come back to him. He feels these memories as "kicks" and says they were "longer and harder than usual. Which is why I am writing this book. To think. To understand. . . . I have to write things down to feel I fully understand them" [p. 5]. Why does this particular song have such a powerful effect on Watanabe? What does he understand--or fail to understand--about it by the end of the novel? In what ways does the process of writing help in understanding?

2. Many readers and critics have observed that **Norwegian Wood** is Murakami's most autobiographical book. While we can never know exactly to what degree a work of fiction reflects the lived experience of its author, what qualities of the novel feel autobiographical rather than purely fictional? Do these qualities enhance your enjoyment of the book?

3. After Watanabe sleeps with Naoko, he says that "her cry was the saddest sound of orgasm I had ever heard" [p. 40]. Just before she commits suicide, Naoko tells Reiko: "I just don't want anybody going inside me again. I just don't want to be violated like that again--by anybody" [p. 284]. In what sense did Watanabe "violate" her? Do you feel this experience directly relates to her suicide? Was it, as Watanabe still asks himself nearly twenty years later, "the right thing to do"?

4. Throughout the novel, Watanabe is powerfully drawn to both Naoko and Midori. How are these women different from one another? How would you describe the different kinds of love they offer Watanabe? Why do you think he finally chooses Midori? Has he made the right choice?

5. The events **Norwegian Wood** relates take place in the late sixties, a period of widespread student unrest. The university Watanabe attends is frequently beset with protests and strikes and, in Watanabe's view, pompous "revolutionary" speeches filled with meaningless clich?s. "The true enemy of this bunch," Watanabe thinks, "was not State Power but Lack of Imagination" [p. 57]. At first, he identifies with the student protesters but then grows cynical. What qualities of Watanabe's character make this cynicism inevitable? What is Midori's reaction to student activism?

6. How would you describe Watanabe's friend Nagasawa? What is his view of life, of the right way to live? Why is Watanabe drawn to him? In what important ways--particularly in their treatment of women--are they different? How does Murakami use the character of Nagasawa to define Watanabe more sharply?

7. The Great Gatsby is Watanabe's favorite book, one that he rereads often. Why do you think he identifies so strongly with Fitzgerald's novel? What does this identification reveal about his character and his worldview?

8. In many ways, **Norwegian Wood** is a novel about young people struggling to find themselves and survive their various troubles. Kizuki, Hatsumi, Naoko's sister, and Naoko herself fail in this struggle and commit suicide. How do their deaths affect those they leave behind? In what ways does Kizuki's suicide both deepen and tragically limit Watanabe's relationship with Naoko?

9. Murakami's prose rises at times to an incandescent lyricism. The description of Watanabe embracing Naoko is one such instance: "From shoulder to back to hips, I slid my hand again and again, driving the line and the softness of her body into my brain. After we had been in this gentle embrace for a while, Naoko touched her lips to my forehead and slipped out of bed. I could see her pale blue gown flash in the darkness like a fish" [p. 163]. Where else do you find this poetic richness in **Norwegian Wood**? What does such writing add to the novel? What does it tell us about Watanabe's sensibility?

10. At the center of the novel, Reiko tells the long and painful story of how her life was ruined by a sexual relationship with a young and pathologically dishonest female student. How does this story within the story illuminate other relationships in the novel?

11. What is unusual about the asylum where Reiko and Naoko are staying? What methods of healing are employed there? How do the asylum and the principles on which it is run illuminate the concerns about being "normal" that nearly

all the characters in the novel express?

12. Naoko attributes Kizuki's suicide and her own depression to the fact that they shared such an idyllic childhood together and eventually, as adults, had to pay the price for that early happiness. "We didn't pay when we should have, so now the bills are due" [p. 128]. Do you think this is an accurate way of understanding what's happened to them? What alternative explanations would you propose?

13. After Kizuki and Naoko have both committed suicide, Watanabe writes: "I had learned one thing from Kizuki's death, and I believed that I had made it part of myself in the form of a philosophy: 'Death is not the opposite of life but an innate part of life'" [p. 273]. What do you think he means? Is this view of life and death resigned or affirmative? How would such a philosophy change one's approach to life?

14. What makes Midori such an engaging and forceful character? How is she different from everyone else in the novel? What kind of love does she demand from Watanabe? Is she being selfish in her demands or simply asking for what everyone wants but is afraid to pursue?

15. Norwegian Wood appears to end on a happy note with Watanabe calling Midori and telling her: "All I want in the world is you. . . . I want the two of us to begin everything from the beginning" [p. 293]. But when Midori asks where he is, Watanabe is plunged into a kind of existential confusion. How do you interpret the novel's final mysterious sentence: "Again and again, I called out for Midori from the dead center of this place that was no place." Is there anything positive in Watanabe's not knowing "where he is"? What is the significance of his being at the "dead center" of no place, wishing for a new beginning?

16. The events of the novel take place in the fictional past. What can you infer about Watanabe's present condition from the way he tells this story? Do you imagine that he and Midori have remained together?

Author Bio

Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto in 1949 and now lives near Tokyo. His work has been translated into more than 50 languages, and one of the most recent of his many international honors is the Cino Del Duca World Prize, whose previous recipients include Jorge Luis Borges, Ismail Kadare, Mario Vargas Llosa and Joyce Carol Oates.

Critical Praise

"[Murakami belongs] in the topmost rank of writers of international stature."

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Publication Date: September 12, 2000
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 298 pages
Publisher: Vintage
ISBN-10: 0375704027
ISBN-13: 9780375704024