Discussion Questions

Norwegian Wood
by Haruki Murakami

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 clichés. "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?

Source: http://www.readinggroupguides.com/
'Strange things happen in this world," Haruki Murakami says. "You don't know why, but they happen." It could be a guiding motto for all of his fiction, but he is talking specifically about a minor character in his new novel, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*. The character is a jazz pianist who seems to have made a pact with death, and is able to see people's auras.

"Why that pianist can see the colours of people, I don't know," Murakami muses. "It just happens." Novels in general, he thinks, benefit from a certain mystery. "If the very important secret is not solved, then readers will be frustrated. That is not what I want. But if a certain kind of secret stays secret, it's a very sound curiosity. I think readers need it."

The world's most popular cult novelist is sipping coffee in the sunny library of an Edinburgh hotel, which – perhaps disappointingly for admirers of his more fantastical yarns – is not reached through a labyrinthine network of subterranean tunnels. Murakami is relaxed and affable, rather than forbiddingly gnomic. "I'm not mysterious!" he says, laughing.

*Tsukuru Tazaki*, as the author calls his own novel for short, sold a million copies in two weeks when it came out last summer in Japan. (Murakami was born in Kyoto to two literature teachers, and grew up in the port city of Kobe. These days he lives near Tokyo, having spent periods in Greece, at Princeton and Tufts universities – where he wrote his masterpiece, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* – and recently in Hawaii.) It contains passing mysteries like the pianist who sees auras, but it is also a mystery novel in a larger sense. Tsukuru, its 36-year-old protagonist, is still in mourning for the years before he went to university, when he was part of an inseparable group of five friends...
– until one day they told him, without explanation, that they never wanted to see him again.

"In the first place I had the intention to write a short story," Murakami says. "I just wanted to describe that guy, 36 years old, very solitary ... I wanted to describe his life. So his secret was not to be dissolved; the mystery was going to stay a mystery."

But he hadn't reckoned on the inciting power of a woman to move the story forward, as Murakami's female characters so often do. "When I wrote that short-story part," he continues, "Sara, [Tsukuru's] girlfriend, came to him and she said, 'You should find out what happened then', so he went to Nagoya to see his old friends. And the same thing happened to me. Sara came to me and said, 'You should go back to Nagoya and find out what happened.' When I was writing the book, my own character came to me and told me what to do ... The fiction and my experience happened at the same time, in parallel. So it became a novel."

Murakami has often spoken of the theme of two dimensions, or realities, in his work: a normal, beautifully evoked everyday world, and a weirder supernatural realm, which may be accessed by sitting at the bottom of a well (as does the hero of The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle), or by taking the wrong emergency staircase off a city expressway (as in 1Q84). Sometimes dreams act as portals between these realities. In Tsukuru Tazaki there is a striking sex dream, at the climax of which the reader is not sure whether Tsukuru is still asleep or awake. Yet Murakami hardly ever remembers his own dreams.

"Once I talked to a very famous therapist in Japan," he says, "and I said to him that I don't dream much, almost nothing, and he said: 'That makes sense.' So I wanted to ask him: 'Why? Why does it make sense?' But there was no time. And I was waiting to see him again, but he died three or four years ago." He smiles sadly. "Too bad."

His novels thus far have generally divided into two types. There are the overtly magical-realist romances (A Wild Sheep Chase, The Wind-up Bird Chronicle, 1Q84), and the works on a smaller canvas, in which hints of the supernatural remain mostly beneath the mournful, mundane surface (South of
the Border, West of the Sun; Sputnik Sweetheart). With its unresolved mysteries, tales-within-tales and maybe-dreams, Tsukuru Tazaki seems almost a hybrid of both styles. "I had been thinking my novels are divided into two categories, as you said," he agrees. "So it's just like Beethoven's symphonies, you know, odd numbers and even numbers. Three, five, seven, nine is kind of a big symphony, and two, four, six, eight is a kind of intimate work. I think my novels do the same thing. What do I think about this Tsukuru Tazaki? Yeah, it might be a new category."

Such musical comparisons come naturally to Murakami, who along with his wife, Yoko Takahashi, ran a jazz bar called Peter Cat in Tokyo in his twenties, which he opened while still a drama student at Waseda University. Murakami sold the bar and concentrated on writing full-time after the publication of his second novel, Pinball. Since then, his life has been one of writing and long-distance running – as chronicled in his memoir What I Talk About When I Talk About Running – and also collecting records. His novels almost always feature a thematic piece of music (his breakout Japanese bestseller, Norwegian Wood, was named after the Beatles song). The unusual harmonies of Thelonious Monk’s "'Round Midnight" were perfect for this novel's haunted pianist, he thought: "Thelonious Monk’s tune is full of mysteries. Monk plays some very strange sounds during the chords. Very strange. But to him it's a very logical chord. But when we are listening to his music it doesn't sound logical."

Meanwhile, Tsukuru and his former friends listen to "Le Mal du Pays", a piece from Liszt's set of piano suites Years of Pilgrimage (hence the novel's subtitle). It was the soundtrack to the novel's composition. "I wake up early in the morning and I play a record, a vinyl record, when I'm writing. Not so loud. After 10 or 15 minutes I forget about the music, I just concentrate on my writing. But still I need some kind of music, good music. When I was writing Tsukuru Tazaki I was listening to Liszt, the Years of Pilgrimage, and that song, 'Le mal du pays', remained in my mind somehow, so I just wanted to write something about that song. That's a beautiful record." Listening to it, Tsukuru feels as if "he'd swallowed a hard lump of cloud".
The solitary adult Tsukuru works as a designer of railway stations. "There is a reason I'm interested in railway stations," Murakami begins to explain, not unmysteriously. It dates back to his early 20s, when he was looking for a good location in Tokyo to open his jazz bar. "I heard a certain railway company was rebuilding a station," he says. He wanted to know where the new entrance would be, so his bar would be near it. "But that's a secret, you know, because people are speculating." At the time Murakami was studying drama, but he went to the railway company and pretended to be a student of railways, befriending the man who was in charge of the rebuilding project. "He didn't tell me the new location of the entrance to the station. But he was a nice guy. We had a good time together. So when I wrote this book I remembered that episode.

"I have collected so many memories, in my chest, the chest of my mind," he says with satisfaction. "I think everybody has a lot of memories of his or her own, but it's a special gift to find the right drawer. I can do that. If I need something, I can point to the right drawer."

Tsukuru considers himself uninteresting, an "empty vessel", but Murakami almost can't help giving his hero an aesthetic sensibility. At one point, Tsukuru sees a chair in an office: "The chair was a simple Scandinavian design of chrome and white leather. Beautiful, clean, and silent, with not an ounce of warmth, like a fine rain falling under the midnight sun." So is Tsukuru really more interesting than he thinks he is? With the novelist's humane affection focused on them, might anyone be?

"I don't know," Murakami says. "I have many similarities to [Tsukuru]. I see myself as a kind of ordinary guy. I don't think of myself as an artist, mostly. I guess I'm just engineering something." A builder, like Tsukuru? "Yeah, right!" He chuckles. "I like to write. I like to choose the right word, I like to write the right sentence. It's just like gardening or something. You put the seed into the soil at the right time, in the right place."

That kind of engineering is exhausting, though: a daily trip to the "basement of the mind" and back up again. "You can say that it's a kind of unconscious, subconscious ... you have to go down there and come back to the surface. You
have to dedicate yourself to that work. You have no extra space to do something else."

Murakami's style is simple, even apparently casual, on the surface, and *Tsukuru Tazaki*, like many of his previous novels, has divided critics into those who find it banal and those who perceive greater depth in its vividness and precision of imagery. Like most simple styles, of course, his is the result of lots of hard work. "I take time to rewrite," he explains. "Rewriting is my favourite part of writing. The first time is a kind of torture, sometimes. Raymond Carver [whose work Murakami has translated into Japanese] said the same thing. I met him and I talked with him in 1983 or 84, and he said: 'The first draft is kind of torture, but when you rewrite it's getting better, so you are happy, it's getting better and better and better.'" There is never a deadline for a Murakami novel – "I don't like deadlines ... when it's finished, it's finished. But before then, it is not finished." Sometimes he can't tell when he should stop rewriting, but "my wife knows. Yes. Sometimes she decides: 'You should be finished here.'" He smiles and imitates his own obedient response: "'OK!'"

Right now, Murakami is not writing anything. "After *1Q84*," he says, "I was so exhausted ... Usually when I'm exhausted by writing a big novel, I write a set of short stories. But not that time ... I didn't have any strong energy to descend" – he mimes going down into the basement. "You have to be strong to descend into the darkness of your mind." But after finishing *Tsukuru Tazaki*, Murakami wrote six short stories in three months; they were published this summer in Japan, under a title meaning "Men Without Women". He might, he thinks, begin another novel next year. A long one, like an odd-numbered Beethoven symphony? "I think maybe a big book, yes."

Asked to name some of his favourite writers working today, Murakami enthuses about Kazuo Ishiguro ("I think he dedicates himself to the writing ... When he's not writing he goes around the world, but when he's writing he goes nowhere"), Cormac McCarthy ("always riveting"), and the Norwegian novelist Dag Solstad, whom he is currently translating into Japanese from English ("He's a kind of surrealistic writer, very strange novels. I think that's serious literature"). As he has translated Raymond Chandler, I ask him about
modern crime writers too. "I like **Lee Child,**" he **announces decisively, and laughs. So do I, I say.** "Oh you like him? That's good! So far I have read 10 of them." What do you like about them? He moves his hands in the air as though running his fingers over an invisible piano keyboard, and grins. "Everything's the same!"

Murakami doesn't read many of his Japanese contemporaries. Does he feel detached from his home scene? "It's a touchy topic," he says, chuckling. "I'm a kind of outcast of the Japanese literary world. I have my own readers ... But critics, writers, many of them don't like me." Why is that? "I have no idea! I have been writing for 35 years and from the beginning up to now the situation's almost the same. I'm kind of an ugly duckling. Always the duckling, never the swan.

"But I think, in a sense, we are playing different games," he continues. "I began to think that way. It's very similar, but the rules are different. The equipment's different, and the fields are different. Like tennis and squash. " Does he think he'd be accepted if he won the Nobel prize, as many people now expect will happen? "Uh, I don't want to speculate," he says, and laughs. "That's a very risky topic. Maybe I would be hanged from a lamppost, I don't know!"

How long does Murakami think the game of literature can last? "I think serious readers of books are 5% of the population," he says. "If there are good TV shows or a World Cup or anything, that 5% will keep on reading books very seriously, enthusiastically. And if a society banned books, they would go into the forest and remember all the books. So I trust in their existence. I have confidence."

What would he still like to achieve for himself, as a writer? "Honestly, I don't have any idea," he replies. "**Scott Fitzgerald** was my idol when I was young. But he died when he was 40-something. I love **Truman Capote**, but he died at 50-something. And Dostoyevsky is my ideal writer, but he died at 59. I'm 65 right now. I don't know what's going to happen! So I have no role model. I have no idea – when I am 80 years old, what will I write? I don't
know. Maybe I'm running and writing ..." "That would be great. But nobody knows."

He says he tries to think of himself as a kind of craftsman, a tinker. "I'd like to be a perfect tinker. So I have to write good sentences – honest and beautiful and elegant and strong sentences."

Source: http://www.theguardian.com/
"I once had a girl / Or should I say, she once had me," go the opening lines of "Norwegian Wood," the Beatles song whose title Haruki Murakami borrowed for his 1987 novel. It happens to be a neat summary of Murakami's basic plot: boy falls for complicated girl and is changed forever. But the song, like the book, is not so easily described. An apparently simple lyric shifts upon closer reading; an oddly haunting snatch of melody repeats in the mind. "Norwegian Wood" is no idle choice for a title: it creates a subliminal background, both aural and symbolic, for a masterly novel of late-60's love.

Murakami has become popular in the West for a very different kind of fiction: novels like "A Wild Sheep Chase" and "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle" feature matter-of-fact narrators enmeshed in bizarre postmodern fantasias. In his native country, however, "Norwegian Wood" is the novel that made Murakami famous. Jay Rubin's superb translation is the first English edition authorized for publication outside Japan. (True fans may have tracked down Alfred Birnbaum's earlier translation, published for Japanese students of English.) Though it may feel uncharacteristically straightforward to his American following, "Norwegian Wood" bears the unmistakable marks of Murakami's hand. Set against the upheaval of the student movement, it is more firmly rooted in Japan (and in Murakami's own experience) than his other work, but this is, nevertheless, a strikingly Westernized Japan, one where people listen to Bill Evans, read Thomas Mann, drink too much coffee and sound like refugees from a Raymond Carver story. Here also is another of Murakami's low-key narrators, 37-year-old Toru Watanabe, who recalls the emotional turmoil of his college years with dispassionate detachment. And although what Toru narrates never ventures into the surreal, his story proves that "ordinary" love is no less rich and strange.

"What if I've forgotten the most important thing?" Toru asks as, 20 years later, he tries to set down certain events that took place in the late 1960's. "What if somewhere inside me there is a dark limbo where all the truly important memories are heaped and slowly turning into mud?" His question lends the novel a desperate intensity; this is no exercise in soft-focus nostalgia, but an urgent attempt to preserve an exquisitely painful time.
In 1968 Toru is 18, new to Tokyo and living in a private dormitory complex. The buildings give "the impression of being either apartment houses that had been converted into jails or jails that had been converted into apartment houses," and the student residents, all male, create a fug of cigarette butts and empty beer cans and dirty laundry -- all except for Toru's roommate, a stuttering geography major whose fanatic cleanliness earns him the nickname Storm Trooper. Neither extreme fazes Toru. Philosophical and almost disturbingly self-contained, he writes off his college years as "a period of training in techniques for dealing with boredom."

But then one day he bumps into a fellow student from back home. Naoko was his best friend Kizuki's girlfriend until Kizuki killed himself -- a crisis that begins to explain Toru's disconnection from his peers as well as Naoko's increasingly fractured psyche. "It's like I'm split in two and playing tag with myself," she tells Toru. In the course of their mostly wordless Sunday walks along miles of Tokyo streets, a new relationship begins to form, although neither is quite able to define it. In the spring, on the evening of her birthday, Naoko is compulsively chatty, but when Toru mentions his curfew, she begins to sob "with the force of a person vomiting on all fours." His desperate efforts to comfort her end in her bed. A few days later she is gone, leaving no forwarding address and taking much of Toru's shell of composure with her.

It is months before Naoko writes to him from a sanitarium in the mountains outside Kyoto, a place for raveled souls to knit themselves back together. Now it is Toru's turn to be split in two: half of him waiting, suspended, for Naoko's recovery, the other half still rooming with Storm Trooper, going to lectures and starting a new friendship with a classmate named Midori. She is the anti-Naoko, a vibrant girl "like a small animal that has popped into the world with the coming of spring." Kizuki's suicide shocked Toru with the realization that death is always present among us, "and we go on living and breathing it into our lungs like fine dust." Midori, who wears her skirts short and wields her candor like a weapon, blows the dust away.

In some ways, the landscape of "Norwegian Wood" is as disconcerting as that of Murakami's weirdest work. There are no real homes here, only more or less humane institutions: schools, universities, hospitals. Safe havens don't exist, and love is never truly unconditional. Sanity is a zero-sum game: a person who offers solace to another often does so at great personal expense. Reiko, Naoko's wise and slightly wacky roommate at the sanitarium, describes herself as "the scratchy stuff on the side of the matchbox" -- always helping others to ignite while quietly wearing herself out.
Happiness, it seems, is the ability to ignore hidden danger. When Toru goes to visit Naoko, she tells him about the "field well," a dark hole at the border of meadow and forest whose depth is terrifying and whose precise location is unknown. At any moment, "you could fall in and that’d be the end of you." Whether the well exists outside Naoko’s troubled mind is irrelevant. The emotional chasm it represents is all too real. Kizuki fell in, and Naoko teeters on its edge.

At 20, Toru finds himself if not at a chasm then at a crossroads. In one direction is the "quiet and gentle and transparent love" he feels for Naoko, a stalled love with an unhappy present and an uncertain future. In the other is Midori, who inspires in Toru a feeling that "stands and walks on its own, living and breathing and throbbing and shaking me to the roots of my being." And cruising beneath is the memory of Kizuki, eternally 17, inviting Naoko and even Toru to opt out of adulthood.

If this were just a love story, either Naoko or Midori would gracefully cede the field, and Toru would stride forward into maturity with the other by his side. But even when Haruki Murakami is writing fantasy, he doesn’t write fairy tales. Toru, trying doggedly to navigate according to his own moral compass, is left with neither resolution nor absolution -- just memories, and a song that will always make him shudder.

Source: http://www.nytimes.com/