

Nobel Authors in the Literature Classroom: 2017 Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro and the Case for Conscious Empathy

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Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Many years before the Swedish Academy honored Japanese-born, British-educated writer Kazuo Ishiguro with the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature for his resilient works about the human spirit, the author highlighted in his work the necessity for exploring and improving the human condition. I have published on Ishiguro and his works for over 20 years, and I interviewed Ishiguro twice (2000 & 2006). I can attest to Ishiguro's ability to motivate empathy in his fiction, in order to broaden intercultural understanding and communication. We may discover in literary fiction ways to explore our human condition, recognize suffering, and find ways to be allies to one another in times of change and instability. I advocate for the teaching of Nobel authors in the literature classroom—particularly focusing on Japanese-origin laureates such as Ishiguro, Oe Kenzaburo, and Kawabata Yasunari for this paper. I will discuss how their books create wider communities of kinship and induct readers to bear witness to human experiences through literature. Indeed, these laureates fulfill Alfred Nobel's legacy that literature can bestow the greatest benefit to mankind.

Keywords: Nobel in Literature, Japanese Laureates, Empathy, Kawabata, Oe, Ishiguro

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Introduction: The Terms of the Nobel Prize in Literature

In his will, Alfred Nobel bequeathed money for five annual prizes, including one for literature. The 1895 document stipulated that the laureate in literature would be honored for “the most outstanding work in an ideal direction” and that this exceptional lifetime’s work should bestow “the greatest benefit to mankind” (Nobelprize.org). Critic Kjell Espmark (2001) explains that regarding the literature prize for the century to follow, the Swedish Academy grappled with exactly what Nobel meant by “an ideal direction” and what would constitute the “greatest benefit on mankind” (Nobelprize.org). I hope to indicate what some of these benefits might entail by focusing on the lifetime achievement of 2017 laureate Ishiguro.

Espmark identifies several distinct phases in the history of the literature prize, including “A Lofty and Sound Idealism” (1901 to approximately 1914) and “A Policy of Neutrality” (The Great War period) in the first couple of decades. This was followed by authors contributing to “The Great Style” in the 1920s, those of “Universal Interest” in the 1930s, and “The Pioneers” spanning the next four decades to 1977. “Attention to Unknown Masters” covered less than a decade (1977-1985), and it appears that since 1985, Nobel laureates have shared in presenting “The Literature of the Whole World.”

Japanese-origin Laureates: Kawabata, Oe, and Ishiguro

My paper highlights Japanese-origin authors. Kawabata Yasunari won the prize in 1968 and was the first Eastern-world author to do so, prompting the Academy to acknowledge the challenges of selecting non-Western authors for their long and short lists. In 1968, Kawabata was honored “for his narrative mastery, which with great sensibility expresses the essence of the Japanese mind” (Nobelprize.org). Indeed, Kawabata answered the Academy’s praise of his national contributions to world literature with his Nobel lecture that was translated as “Japan, the Beautiful and Myself.” Kawabata’s award fits under Espmark’s category of “The Pioneers” and certainly marks the Academy’s incipient interest in literatures beyond the Eurocentric scope.

In 1994, another Japanese origin author, Oe Kenzaburo, was honored as an author “who with poetic force creates an imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today” (Nobelprize.org). Like the Academy’s praise for Kawabata’s formal literary achievements, the focus here is on Oe’s poetical imagination and its impact upon world events. However, we notice that the praise for Kawabata may have been Orientalist in tone, while that for Oe is boldly in favor of the “disconcerting picture” of human experiences.

Not surprisingly, Oe’s Nobel lecture is an inversion of Kawabata’s as well. Titled “Japan, The Ambiguous, and Myself,” Oe’s lecture highlighted the radical transformation of Japan in the post Second World War period and the profound impact of personal events that “condense to form” his highly wrought literature. Michiko Niikuni Wilson (2007) indicates that Oe “is one of the most impassioned voices of conscience countering the country’s minimalist cultural tradition that puts imagery and aesthetics of silence above social and political concerns” (Nobelprize.org).

If Kawabata and Oe are paired as contrasts in terms of their literary aesthetics for historical or national representations, then Kazuo Ishiguro's 2017 prize may be seen as a synthesis of concerns shared by all of the Japanese-origin authors. Wilson's assessment of Oe—as an “impassioned voice of conscience”—reflects a legacy equally embraced by Ishiguro.

Many years before the Swedish Academy honored this Japanese-born, British-educated writer for his resilient works about the human spirit, Ishiguro (2008) said, “I feel I am part of that generation for whom making something good out of your life, morally good, was a very conscious thing” (Bigsby, p. 21). The Academy (2017) presented the award to Ishiguro “who, in novels of great emotional force, has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world” (Nobelprize.org).

The Case for Conscious Empathy Cultivated by the Laureates

In Kawabata's lecture, the focus is on what Oe (1994) later called “extremely esoteric poems in Japanese,” including one that Kawabata identified as “a poem of warm, deep, delicate compassion, a poem that has in it the deep quiet of the Japanese spirit.” (Nobelprize.org). Indeed, Oe's own delicate denunciation of Kawabata's choice is highlighted in the 1994 laureate's sense that many worthy literary works are those in which the “whole world was then engulfed by waves of horror” (ibid). Oe unabashedly remarks on “the inhuman atrocities committed by Japanese military forces in Asian countries” (ibid) in a determination to confront Japan's imperial past with its national ambitions and destructions.

Despite these tonal differences in their Nobel speeches, Kawabata and Oe bring attention to how literature can—in Nobel's criteria—bestow the greatest benefit on mankind. To make the case, I would like to focus on the critical achievement of Ishiguro's work. In particular, I have spent over 20 years writing about Ishiguro's life and work, and I can attest to Ishiguro's ability to create in his fiction characters and situations that teach readers how to broaden intercultural understanding and communication.

We may discover in literary fiction ways to explore our human condition, recognize suffering, and find ways to be allies to one another in times of change and instability. I advocate for the teaching of Nobel authors in the literature classroom. I will then discuss how Ishiguro's books create wider communities of kinship and induct readers to bear witness to human experiences through literature.

First, recent research in cognitive and literary studies indicates that reading literature is beneficial for intellectual growth and cultivation of compassion. In his article on empathy and literature, Jonathan Gottschall (2012) states: “Fiction enhances our ability to understand other people; it promotes a deep morality that cuts across religious and political creeds.” Gottschall also refers to research by psychologist Dan Johnson who finds that “[r]eading narrative fiction allows one to learn about our social world and as a result fosters [empathetic] growth and prosocial behavior” (qtd. in Gottschall).

David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) are scientists who explored how reading literary fiction can increase our emotional capability and cognition: “Just as in real life, the worlds of literary fiction are replete with complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration” (p. 379).

Julianne Chiaet (2013) notes that reading literary fiction teaches readers how to focus on characterization, the story, and the situation. These literary skills aid in understanding “the psychology of characters and their relationships . . . [thereby prompting] readers to imagine the characters’ introspective dialogues.” Characterization gives us authentic portrayals of people in familiar or alienating situations, while the story and situation provide the historical and geographical contexts for characters to inhabit and relate to self and others.

In teaching literary fiction for more than two decades at an urban university in the United States, I have witnessed the profound effects of literature upon my students. Readers of literary fiction examine the world in the book and contrast it with their own; they judge the efficacy of choices under the conditions found in the stories; they become engaged and responsible for their interpretations; and importantly, they consciously become custodians of the knowledge gained from literature by sharing the ideas in the book with others in discussions and in their written interpretations.

The literature by Nobel authors is especially valuable for introducing students to what literary critic Matthew Arnold (1869) identified as a purpose of literary instruction: we should seek to provide our students with “the best, which has been thought and said in the world.” Nobel laureates, by virtue of their lifetime achievements, certainly meet these criteria.

I therefore advocate for literature teachers who conscientiously guide students towards empathy in their reading of great works of literature. Readers want to frame and understand current events; they are driven by a desire for knowledge of history, and for ways of addressing a fearsome future. Studying literature—and particularly, literary works by Nobel laureates—is inherently rewarding and can help readers identify with and explore the ideas and experiences of other people from all over the world. Ultimately, empathy is tied to a reader’s emotional response to issues most relevant to their own lives.

As Ishiguro (2017) said in his Nobel lecture, “Stories can entertain, sometimes teach or argue a point. But for me the essential thing is that they communicate feelings. That they appeal to what we share as human beings across our borders and divides” (Nobelprize.org). I would like to discuss how Ishiguro’s lifetime work is the kind of literature we should teach in our classes.

Kazuo Ishiguro, 2017 Laureate in Literature

Contemporary author Murakami Haruki is Japan’s most popular author, and he notes (2009): “Ishiguro is like a painter working on an immense painting. The massive, sprawling sort of painting that might cover the ceiling or walls of a cathedral. It is lonely work, which involves huge amounts of time, and vast stores of energy. A lifetime job. Every few years, he completes a section of this painting and shows it to us” (p. viii).

The first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) has widowed Etsuko now living in England as she narrates a time right after the bombing of Nagasaki. Mourning the suicide of her first daughter, Japanese-born Keiko, Etsuko finds a way to tell her anguished story through the lives of another woman and her mysterious daughter from the post-war period.

The second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1987) has an elderly widower Masuji Ono reflecting on his career as an artist, as a painter in fact. He unwittingly reveals how his pre-war, pro-nationalistic paintings may now jeopardize his daughter's marriage prospects a few years after the defeat of Japan in the Second World War.

The third, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is Ishiguro's best-known and beloved novel. Winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, it tells the story of an ageing butler named Stevens who simultaneously regrets and feels ashamed of his life's commitment to a fascist loyalist named Lord Darlington between the world wars.

Ishiguro (2008) said of these works written in his 20s and 30s: "In the first three novels, I was rewriting the same thing. I was on the same piece of territory, and each time I was refining what I wanted to say. [These novels were] about how somebody wasted his life in terms of his career. It's about well-meaning but misguided efforts to lead a good life" (Wong & Crummett, p. 208).

The Unconsoled (1995) represents Ishiguro's most radical departure to date from what many had regarded as the understated, eloquent, and even tranquil early narratives. The musician Ryder is found in disarray and defies the laws of physics in many of his meanderings around the unnamed European city. Called "Kafkaesque" by critics, this novel's explorations tested the limits of Ishiguro's artistic development. Ishiguro (2008) said, "I was really interested in figuring out this kind of dream writing and a 'dream grammar'" (Wong and Crummett, p. 209).

When We Were Orphans (2000) is about a renowned London detective named Christopher who tries to solve the mysterious disappearance of his parents from when he was a child. Ishiguro returned to some of his realist modes, but the novel's many nightmarish episodes also cast it as one of the saddest of all his novels. Ishiguro said (2001), "Perhaps there is something about Christopher discovering that here's a man who thought he was fighting evil, and then he comes to discover that he benefitted from this evil" (Wong and Crummett, p. 185).

Never Let Me Go (2005) ushered in a new generation of Ishiguro readers who followed the dystopic world of Kathy H. and her friends growing up in their beloved and fabled school called Hailsham. Musician Stacey Kent said, "This book broke my heart and left me raw for weeks" (Jacques). Ishiguro (2008) said, "Although it's a story about mortality, I wanted it to be a quite positive story" (Wong and Crummett, p. 220).

Ishiguro on his only short story collection to date, *Nocturnes*: "I feel I made a natural evolution from writing songs to novels [and here] you get five of what seem like totally separate pieces of music but they go together" (Aitkenhead, 2009). More than desiring to be a writer, Ishiguro's first artistic endeavor was playing music.

Ishiguro returned to my home city of Denver in 2015 (his prior visit was in 1995) to read from *The Buried Giant* at our university campus. The story is set in pre-Medieval times and has an elderly couple leave their village in search of their son. There are knights, pixies, a dragon, and some combative monks in a monastery. Ishiguro (2015) wondered about his latest: “Will readers follow me into this? Will they understand what I’m trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements?” (Alter).

Now, I would like to summarize a critical review of Ishiguro’s work to show that it supports the Nobel prize assessment for how his books bestow the greatest benefit to mankind.

Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (2011) identify an important element they call Ishiguro’s “ethics of empathy” as his ability to “make us care about the world, about other people, about ourselves” (p. 2). And they comment, “What is also distinctive about reading Ishiguro’s work is that it creates the sense that we are absorbed into a wider community that crosses geographical and linguistics barriers to stretch across the globe and through time” (p. 2).

Ishiguro’s contemporary, Murakami Haruki remarked (2009): “In all my years of reading Ishiguro, he has never disappointed me or left me doubting him. All I feel is deep admiration for the infallible skill with which he has piled all these different worlds on top of one another” (p. viii).

Conclusion

After the Swedish Academy announced the 2017 Literature Prize to Ishiguro, the United States newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*, asked me to comment and I observed: “Ishiguro’s lifetime work is significant for its mastery of narrative voice and deeply emotional subjects such as healing from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, remorse for serving fascist loyalists, and futile fights against industrialists that control human lives. Ishiguro’s ability to evoke empathy is unparalleled in contemporary fiction” (Gamerman and Gross, 2017).

The online news source, *The Conversation*, asked me to write an article, “The ‘inevitable sadness’ of Kazuo Ishiguro’s Fiction” and I highlighted Ishiguro’s conscious empathy in all of his fiction: “Ishiguro is a gracious guardian of humanity. He is a fine curator of emotions and a skilled storyteller. We don’t know how many more books Ishiguro will publish. But we can be certain that in his literary explorations he will remain undaunted” (Wong, 2017).

We can look forward to new literature laureates from all over the world who will bring their insights and urge readers towards more empathetic connections with one another.

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