

## Readers' Discussion Guide

### *Never Let Me Go*

By Kazuo Ishiguro

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First-Year Reading Experience

University of South Carolina

Monday, August 18, 2008

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We hope you find this Readers' Discussion Guide helpful as you prepare for your small-group discussion. The questions below are intended to serve as guides for conversation, and are not intended to limit your discussion of the book in any way. You are encouraged to construct your own questions and bring them up for discussion in your group.

1. At what point in the story do you start to figure out what the words *career*, *donor*, *completions*, *possible*, *white coats*, and *guardians* mean? How are those meanings different from what you expect? How did you feel when you realized that these terms were euphemisms cloaking a system of cloning human beings for organ "donation"?
2. The book tells the story of school friends over a period of years, from their time at the Hailsham school. How are their experiences and relationships similar or different to those you had?
3. What does Hailsham mean for Kathy? What did it mean to Miss Emily and Madame? How is Hailsham different from an orphanage?
4. Describe the teachers' attitudes towards the students. Why do they bother teaching the students, building their self-esteem, and creating a "normal" life for them?
5. Miss Emily believed hiding the truth from the students was best (pp. 261, 265), but Miss Lucy thought they should know more about their own futures. She tells them, bluntly, "Your lives are set out for you" (p. 81). Do you think Miss Lucy was right? Why or why not?
6. The students at Hailsham live a thoroughly regimented life, full of rules, schedules, and taboos. To what extent does the institutional life of Hailsham, the Cottages, and the Centers spill over and shape how the three main characters interact with one another?
7. What is the role of art in the story? Do you believe the best way to see someone's soul is through his or her artwork? Does the poster used for the 2008 First-Year Reading Experience fit with your view of the book?
8. When Madame sees Kathy dancing with her pillow and singing to the song by the fictional folksinger Judy Bridgewater, she cries. Why do you think she is crying? What does Kathy think the song means? When Madame recalls this scene late in the novel, it takes on symbolic importance—what does she say it meant to her? (See pages 71, 271)
9. What is the significance of "Never Let Me Go" as Kathy's song? As the title of the book? In the last few pages of the novel (pp. 286-288)?
10. Why do Miss Emily and Madame feel revulsion towards the students at Hailsham? Does this conflict with the moral positions they espouse when Tommy and Kathy visit them in part three?
11. At the Cottages, Hailsham graduates learn that other residents think Hailsham students are special and privileged. Are there times when you've felt privileged? Discriminated against? How do these situations

make you feel?

12. As the students transition from life at Hailsham to life at the Cottages, they experience new freedoms—intellectual, romantic and sexual, social—and more exposure to the outside world. How do the young adults adjust to their new freedoms? What is the relation between freedom and limitation in this section? What new freedoms do you anticipate now that you are beginning your first year at USC? Do you anticipate any difficulties?
13. How does the story change after Ruth’s attempt to find her “possible.” What is at stake in this search—for Ruth and for the others? Though the trip is highly anticipated, it seems so anticlimactic. Why?
14. Describe Ruth’s response to learning about her “possible.” How did it make her feel and why? What about after she saw the woman who worked in the office? What do you think Ishiguro was trying to suggest with those scenes in the novel, centered on this “possible”?
15. Why do you think Ishiguro portrays their lives as strangely ordinary? Why don’t Kathy and her friends ever express outrage at their situation? Why don’t they ever try to rebel or escape?
16. Why do the carers live a mobile life, constantly having to drive across the country? Does their exposure to the outside world serve any significant purpose in their work? Does it offer them any way out of their assigned lives?
17. How would you describe Ruth? What would you say about her relationship with Tommy? How did you feel when late in the novel she encouraged Kathy and Tommy to pursue a relationship? Why does she do this?
18. How would you describe love in the novel? Why do the students believe in the rumor of a deferral for those who are in love? Does love offer a reprieve from a limited world?
19. How does the story change after Kathy and Tommy visit Miss Emily and Madame? Why are they there? What do they hope to achieve? What do they learn? How does your experience of the story change after this?
20. How convincing do you find Miss Emily’s explanations to Kathy and Tommy about the purpose of their education and the changes that took place at Hailsham and in the academy system leading up to its closure? Is she being honest with them, and with herself?
21. How did you feel when you read the last paragraph of the novel? What do the last lines suggest about Kathy’s state of mind at the end—denial? acceptance? courage? resignation?
22. Were you expecting a happy ending to the novel? When Tommy and Kathy don’t get a deferral and learn the full extent of their position, were you surprised? Why are they resigned to their fate? Would you be? How would your experience of the novel change if there had been a happy ending?
23. In one sense, *Never Let Me Go* is a depressing story, one of hopelessness, representing the inability of anyone to transcend social limitations or break out of preset expectations. In another sense, however, the novel could also be about living life to the fullest before one’s time is up. What is your sense of the story?
24. How realistically does the novel, in fact, represent our own world? Do you consider this book science fiction, or a preview of what is likely to come in our society as a result of science and research? Does the similarity make the ethical issues seem stronger or less apparent? How would the story be different if he had set it in England, 2020? Or the United States, 1953?

25. Are clones human? Madame ridicules Tommy and Kathy's sense that they have "God-given" rights (p. 265), and asks, "Poor creatures. What did we do to you?" What does she mean by that?
26. In the United States and Western Europe, organ donation currently operates upon a priority-based system of free donation, with far more people in need of organs than are available. Some economists have proposed opening organ donation to the free market, where people who can afford to purchase and people who wish to sell their organs in a global marketplace will do so freely. What are the moral implications of such a transformation?
27. Imagine that you are a politician or policy maker chairing a committee on medical research and technology. What advice might you glean from Ishiguro's novel? What questions does it raise? What cautions or warnings does it offer? Does it offer a way forward in thinking about the complex and emotionally charged debate over human cloning?
28. In a recent interview in *The Guardian* (2 Feb 2005), Ishiguro talked about *Never Let Me Go*: "There are things I am more interested in than the clone thing. How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter?" How does this fit with your own sense of the novel? Does the novel prompt you to think about "the things that really matter"?
29. What is the relation of Miss Emily and Madame? Is this important?
30. Why do you think Ishiguro decided to write his novel from the perspective of Kathy? Why did he choose her as his narrator? How would the novel change if he had selected some other narrator—Ruth or Tommy, for instance, or even a third-person omniscient narrator?

**We look forward to seeing you on Monday, August 18,  
at 8:30 a.m. at the Carolina Coliseum.**

If you have questions about the  
First-Year Reading Experience, please contact  
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