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Autor: Murakami Haruki

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In 1987, when Norwegian Wood was first published in Japan, it promptly sold more than 4 million copies and transformed Haruki Murakami into a pop-culture icon. The horrified author fled his native land for Europe and the United States, returning only in 1995, by which time the celebrity spotlight had found some fresher targets. And now he's finally authorized a translation for the English-speaking audience, turning to the estimable Jay Rubin, who did a fine job with his big-canvas production *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Readers of Murakami's later work will discover an affecting if atypical novel, and while the author himself has denied the book's autobiographical import--"If I had simply written the literal truth of my own life, the novel would have been no more than fifteen pages long"--it's hard not to read as at least a partial portrait of the artist as a young man.

Norwegian Wood is a simple coming-of-age tale, primarily set in 1969-70, when the author was attending university. The political upheavals and student strikes of the period form the novel's backdrop. But the focus here is the young Watanabe's love affairs, and the pain and pleasure and attendant losses of growing up. The collapse of a romance (and this is one among many!) leaves him in a metaphysical shambles:

I read Naoko's letter again and again, and each time I read it I would be filled with the same unbearable sadness I used to feel whenever Naoko stared into my eyes. I had no way to deal with it, no place I could take it to or hide it away. Like the wind passing over my body, it had neither shape nor weight, nor could I wrap myself in it.

This account of a young man's sentimental education sometimes reads like a cross between Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Stephen Vizinczey's *In Praise of Older Women*. It is less complex and perhaps ultimately less satisfying than Murakami's other, more allegorical work. Still, Norwegian Wood captures the huge expectation of youth--and of this particular time in history--for the future and for the place of love in it. It is also a work saturated with sadness, an emotion that can sometimes cripple a novel but which here merely underscores its youthful poignancy.

In a complete stylistic departure from his mysterious and surreal novels (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*; *A Wild Sheep Chase*) that show the influences of Salinger, Fitzgerald and Tom

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Robbins, Murakami tells a bittersweet coming-of-age story, reminiscent of J.R. Salamanca's classic 1964 novel, *Lilith*--the tale of a young man's involvement with a schizophrenic girl. A successful, 37-year-old businessman, Toru Watanabe, hears a version of the Beatles' Norwegian Wood, and the music transports him back 18 years to his college days. His best friend, Kizuki, inexplicably commits suicide, after which Toru becomes first enamored, then involved with Kizuki's girlfriend, Naoko. But Naoko is a very troubled young woman; her brilliant older sister has also committed suicide, and though sweet and desperate for happiness, she often becomes untethered. She eventually enters a convalescent home for disturbed people, and when Toru visits her, he meets her roommate, an older musician named Reiko, who's had a long history of mental instability. The three become fast friends. Toru makes a commitment to Naoko, but back at college he encounters Midori, a vibrant, outgoing young woman. As he falls in love with her, Toru realizes he cannot continue his relationship with Naoko, whose sanity is fast deteriorating. Though the solution to his problem comes too easily, Murakami tells a subtle, charming, profound and very sexy story of young love bound for tragedy. Published in Japan in 1987, this novel proved a wild success there, selling four million copies.

Writing in a style that is deceptively plainspoken, Haruki Murakami finds a dreamlike common ground between Japan and the West, conscious and subconscious. His heroes lose themselves in quests that we may not always understand, but are hopelessly compelled to follow.