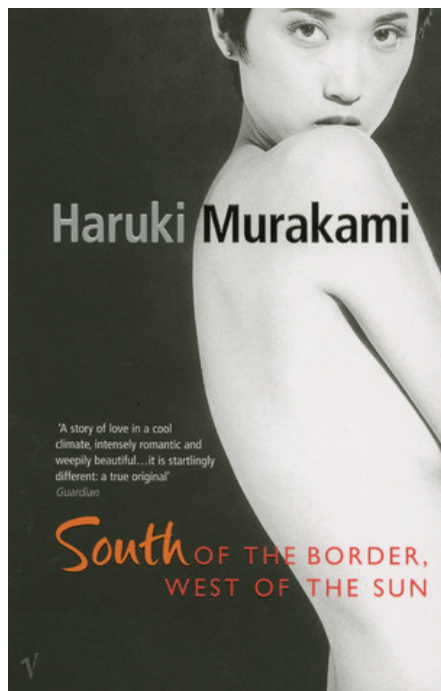




South of the Border, West of the Sun

Haruki Murakami , Philip Gabriel (Translator)

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Alternate cover edition here.

Growing up in the suburbs of post-war Japan, it seemed to Hajime that everyone but him had brothers and sisters. His sole companion was Shimamoto, also an only child. Together they spent long afternoons listening to her father's record collection. But when his family moved away, the two lost touch. Now Hajime is in his thirties. After a decade of drifting he has found happiness with his loving wife and two daughters, and success running a jazz bar. Then Shimamoto reappears. She is beautiful, intense, enveloped in mystery. Hajime is catapulted into the past, putting at risk all he has in the present.

South of the Border, West of the Sun Details

Date : Published December 1st 2006 by Vintage (first published 1992)

ISBN : 9780099448570

Author : Haruki Murakami , Philip Gabriel (Translator)

Format : Paperback 190 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Japan, Asian Literature, Japanese Literature

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From Reader Review South of the Border, West of the Sun for online ebook

Lisa says

I really didn't enjoy this book, but it did make me think about why, so at least it had that going for it.

I found Hajime an infinitely unlikeable character, but I couldn't put my finger on the details of why. He had no problem doing things that would hurt the women he claimed to "love", even as he said that there must be something wrong with him for doing so. I think of "that's just the way I am, nothing to be done" as the worst, laziest possible excuse for bad behavior toward others.

But it wasn't until I got to the end of the story that I began to be able to articulate what I disliked about Hajime, and therefore the book. Hajime loses the only dream he's ever had in life, Shimamoto, though he knows absolutely zero about her as an adult (somehow that doesn't matter...he just wants the dream, not a real person). He is crushed at the somehow dismal prospect of providing dreams for others (his family), instead of pursuing his own dream no matter the cost. I found that utterly depressing. A character that a) can't generate new dreams in life, and b) is miserable about the newly discovered prospect of providing for the dreams of people he claims to love, is utterly unappealing to me. I wonder if Hajime was meant as an illustration of a total failure of a human-in-relationship, or whether he was supposed to be a somewhat sympathetic character and I just hated him anyway.

The only book I can compare it to that I really did like is Lolita. Reading that book, it was crystal clear that we were reading a story offered to us by a wildly unreliable (first-person) narrator, and that this story, presented to us as star-crossed, tragic love, was really about something else entirely--the danger and blindness of sick obsession, a child's loss of her right and ability to define and direct her self. I could appreciate South of the Border on this level, thinking of how Hajime's narration about himself was completely unreliable, and underneath there was a story about someone who spent his life driven only by what he wanted, with no understanding of or interest in his impact on others. Interestingly, this also somehow leaves him completely unable to understand his impact on himself.

Boysie Freeman (not my real name, it's just my Internet name) says

At first I dislike this book but now I am confident to say that I hate it.

It's about this shallow and whiny man who wronged every woman he put his hand on (probably because he is so deep, no one can understand him since he's the only child, yes, you gotta remember how painful it is for this Hajime guy to be the only child)... except his childhood sweetheart who is so deep that she never has a real personality but some random emo appeal which cannot make me care less. The author tried so hard but she turned out to be a sphinx without a secret. Meanwhile our hero remains an emo for the rest of the book, and maybe the rest of his life. He's got everything he wants but he cannot stop complaining and fancying about that girl whom he had a crush on, yet never actually knows. Did I mention she's the only child also?

Years after they collided in some cliché fashion: the rain, the bar, some cocktails and jazz music playing and OMFG she's so mysterious. They made love (yeah how unpredictable) and then she disappeared because the book would be deep if it's an unhappy one, and then the guy was like "WTF happened was that all a dream?" because the money is gone (yeah if you have read then you know I mean what money) but no it was real and he came back to his poor wife. And his wife is the only likeable character out there.

“After a certain length of time has passed, things harden up. Like cement hardening in a bucket. And we can’t go back anymore. What you want to say is that the cement that makes you up has hardened, so the you you are now can’t be anyone else.”

Our decisions, the choices we make, these affect not only things around us but also molds our identity. Little by little we change because of what we choose. We become someone different from the past, someone unrecognizable. We may not like these changes, but learning to accept who we are; who we’ve become is the most important step to moving on.

Hajime, whose name means beginning in Japanese, is a man from the past. A man fallen in love with Shimamoto, with Izumi, with Yukiko. His story uses these three women as markers for the shifts in his life. He loves, breaks, and loves again. Hajime moves on through each phase of his life different from who he was. Now he is in his thirties married with children and lives a comfortable and contented life until his past comes back to visit him.

“Yet here I am, hurting you. Because I’m selfish, hopeless, worthless human being. For no apparent reason, I hurt people around me and end up hurting myself. Ruining someone else’s life and my own. Not because I like to. But that’s how it ends up.”

You trudge along, sometimes without reason. Hanging on, if not for yourself, then for those around you. If your dreams are gone, you can use your life to fulfill the dreams of people you love. Let them have their happiness, if you can’t have it. Don’t step on their dreams and bring them your misery. If your dreams have faded, dwelling on them cannot give you happiness, it will only bring you more pain. But aim to not let the people you care about feel the same pain.

“And time passing is one thing that can’t be redone. Come this far, and you can’t go back.”

Sure, everyone has that greatest regret, some point in their lives where they say “what if”, leaving someone, choosing another, saying yes. There is that time where we would give everything to redo to choose again, but we cannot. It is all in the past. It is naturally human to crave for this, we seek what we do not know, we crave the mysterious but by doing this, we ignore what we have in front of us. We neglect the present where we can make a difference, and we dwell in the past where we can’t do a thing. So then the present becomes the past, and we realize its value only when we are powerless once more. Maybe we unconsciously love being powerless? Probably. Accepting one’s fate is never easy, learning to live through things that didn’t go as we wanted it to. But that is life. You act and your actions have consequences and you react and you live with it. It is never perfect, but appreciating what you have is the only defiance you can show. You can’t control life, but you can try to control what you feel. Try to achieve contentment and perseverance in this untamable darkness of sea called life. Learn to flow with the tides, and dance with the currents.

“Eventually everyone would fall into those endlessly lonely depths, the source of all darkness, a silence bereft of any resonance. I felt a choking, stifling fear as I stared into this bottomless dark pit.”

“Inside that darkness, I saw rain falling on the sea. Rain softly falling on a vast sea, with no one there to see it. The rain strikes the surface of the sea, yet even the fish don’t know it is raining. Until someone came and lightly rested a hand on my shoulder, my thoughts were of the sea.”

There is always darkness in the absence of light. But is light really absent or are we blind to the light around us? The sun does not shine at night, we call it dark, but the moon is there unnoticed. The light you desire may not appear for you, but a different light is always there to take away darkness. Open your eyes.

In this life, nothing is permanent but change. The sun will always set, the moon too, but a new sun and a new moon will always take its place. Do not resist, accept.

“I might very well be changing. And I had to change.”

“In South of the Border, West of the Sun, the simple arc of a man's life - with its attendant rhythms of success and disappointment - becomes the exquisite literary tableau of Haruki Murakami's most haunting work.”

Moushumi Ghosh says

I have always liked jazz music but I don't think I qualify as a fan. But this book seems like a jazz symphony to me (I'm kind of clueless about jazz. Is there something like a “jazz symphony?”) It's smooth, mysterious and leaves you thirsting for more.

I firmly believe that you don't choose your books; the books choose you. Yeah, I'm one of them people who think that there is no such thing as a coincidence. So, this SOTBWFTS (short form) was a gift from a friend on my birthday.

Anyways, I jumped on the novel like a piece of cake: long denied, much remembered. Since it's a slim volume, I'm done with it in 9 hours with equally slim breaks in between.

At first, you wonder where is the story going? But I'm as usual getting ahead of myself. The story is of an average man, Hajime, who cannot forget the superbly mysterious and beautiful Shimamoto (ironically, he can't remember her first name: this is her last name.) Hajime meets Shimamoto in kindergarten and they both bond over the fact that they are “only” children of their parents. It's a beautiful friendship with music playing (quite literally, since they listen to music most of the time) a major part in their friendship. Polio-infected Shimamoto is the one girl who makes a very deep impression on his young mind. When Shimamoto moves out of his life, Hajime goes on with his life in a very on-the-surface manner. He does the regular things: school, high school sweetheart, college, a dead-end job, find the girl who would be his wife, dabble in business, and become successful. But you get the feeling that something is missing. When one day a stunning woman walks into his club on a rainy evening, everything changes. The woman is Shimamoto. Now, looking more stunning than ever. Hajime is torn between an average life and his prospects with Shimamoto. She appears on rainy evenings to tantalise him. One day, just when he makes a choice, she disappears forever.

Hajime is the everyman in this novel. It's his life we identify with. Shimamoto is the symbol of all that we want and cannot have. She appears from time to time in our lives teasing us with the prospect. But she is like the rain: she can appear but she cannot stay. If she does, she will destroy everything. And the novel is a testament to the fact that her short stay was quite destructive for the protagonist.

This novel is considered to be one of his most mature works. I couldn't help but compare it with Norwegian Wood. The youthful flavour of Norwegian Wood is not to be seen here. But what you can see is a mature writer and a mature man. It's like a sequel to Norwegian Wood. Naoko grows up and become Shimamoto. Toru and Hajime are the same – the passive protagonist –appearing again and again in all Murakami novels. Even in a very adventurous novel like The Wind-up Bird Chronicle, the protagonist remains the calm guy who makes spaghetti. All Murakami protagonists wait for life to happen to them, somehow calm, somehow untouched like the eye of the storm.

All the references to music especially Jazz are there usual. It makes the story all the more poignant. This is not one of them rambunctious novels that use mind-bending narrative pyrotechnics to tell the story and grab

the attention of the reader. It's one of those quiet books that makes a deep impression on your mind. It sure did on mine.

Brendon Schrodinger says

The other night a friend mentioned she is reading '1Q84' at the moment and it got me all nostalgic for a Murakami experience. So choosing one at random of the ever diminishing list of Murakami's I haven't read yet I chose 'South of the Border, West of the Sun'.

What do you get? Unsurprisingly a story that is Murakami. There is an every-man protagonist, mysterious lady from the past, jazz, university protests, people with deformities... I could go on or just use the Murakami Bingo:

Despite being so Murakami that it could have been achieved via a cut/paste exercise from his other novels I still enjoyed it. I just love Murakami. Plot-wise it most reminds me of 'Norwegian Wood', especially that it has no weird story elements. It's just a straight our universe no funny business at all Murakami. Indeed reading it I thought of it as a proto-Norwegian Wood, like a practice piece. But looking at his Wikipedia page I see that he wrote it two novels after 'Norwegian Wood'. Oh well.

So overall this was a likeable read, but probably only recommended for fans who have read the major works. The others offer so much more.

Jelena says

At home, we have a private joke about the two Murakamis. One Haruki Murakami, *my* Murakami, would be the author of "Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The End of the World", "1Q84", "A Wild Sheep Chase". My boyfriend's Murakami, the *other one*, is the one from "Norwegian Wood", "Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki" or "Sputnik Sweetheart". And by a rule of thumb, I love and admire my Murakami, and am indifferent at best (and hostile at worst) towards his.

This one is completely different, though. The protagonist, a fairly ordinary if somewhat better-off man, remembers two important people from his childhood and adolescence, before eventually meeting one of them again more than two decades later. But since this is a Murakami, after all, of course this is a love story, of course there is jazz, of course there are city walks, and of course there is an anything but smooth clockwork of social, emotional and communicational barriers.

More often than not I could hardly comprehend the human interaction in Japanese literature and film. Rationally, I do know about the specific code of conduct. Personally, I am almost always perplexed at all that is left unsaid and withheld, at everything that is not expressed and unresolved. Mostly because it could all be so simple and speaking up feels like the most plausible and natural thing to do. Here the Great Unspoken falls perfectly into place with all those inexplicable little surreal scenes, so typical of Murakami's work. The carefully wielded and shaped events of the plot are the basis for the protagonist's subtle yet stirring inner shifts. Nothing happens here that hasn't happened before or to others, the world isn't about to end, there is

nothing earth-shattering. Maybe not even visibly soul-shattering, since everything passes and life does go on. But still, even though the surface seems untouched, the change within the characters is profound enough that little will be as it was. I have always loved these weighty and deeply personal, exclusively personal, changes in Chekhov's dramas, and I found the same lyrical, melancholy atmosphere here.

But unlike some of Murakami's other inner turbulence stories, with their tendency for the melodramatic or depicting a numb withdrawal, in "South of the Border, West of the Sun" there just seems to be no other way. Because sometimes you have no idea what needs to be said; sometimes you get the idea but nothing will really work in your favour; and sometimes there is no one to say it to.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

A Companion Intervenes

I re-read "South of the Border" immediately after re-reading "Norwegian Wood", as part of my training regime for Murakami's "1Q84".

Although they were written five years apart and were separated by "Dance Dance Dance", they are good companion pieces.

They stand out from Murakami's other novels because they explore love and its consequences almost exclusively.

Although some things and events go unexplained, there is little of the surrealism and absurdity that characterizes most of his other works.

Strangely, whereas "Norwegian Wood" concerns the recollections of a 37 year old protagonist about relationships in his late teens, "South of the Border" concerns the recollections of a 37 year old protagonist about a relationship that originally started and finished before he turned 13, so he was not yet a teenager.

While the protagonist in "Norwegian Wood" seemed to get his girl (or one of them) at the end, there was some doubt in my mind whether the relationship had lasted until the time of narration.

In "South of the Border", the intervening period has brought the protagonist, Hajime, a permanent relationship, marriage, parenthood and business and financial success.

However, his apparent contentment and happiness is jeopardized by the intervention of Shimamoto, his girlfriend from the age of 12.

The Bond of Only-ness

The first quarter of the novel is a relatively straightforward narration of Hajime's first 30 years.

He is born in January, 1951 (which makes him almost exactly two years younger than Murakami himself).

He is an only child, as is Shimamoto.

He detests the term "only child", because it implies he is "missing" something, as if he is an incomplete human being, yet somehow spoiled, weak and self-centred as well.

Hajime is not just interested in Shimamoto because neither of them has any siblings, he's fascinated by the fact that her left leg is slightly lame, yet she "never whines or complains".

Nobody else at school finds her as striking or charming as him, even though he recognizes that she has not yet developed an outer "gorgeousness" to match her inner qualities.

So while they develop a deep relationship, she wraps herself in a protective shell that separates her from other students.

Unfortunately, the relationship comes to an end the year after when they go to different junior high schools.

Relatively Unfaithful

Hajime gets on with life, even getting another girlfriend, Izumi, who he thinks is cute, even if she isn't conventionally pretty.

She is the oldest of three children, though still sensitive enough at 16 to be able to say, "I'm scared. These days I feel like a snail without a shell."

Yet as much as she tries her best to give Hajime all she can, she is destined to make him realize his capacity for hurt:

"...I didn't understand then...that I could hurt somebody so badly she would never recover. That a person can, just by living, damage another human being beyond repair."

Just after Hajime's 18th birthday, he is preparing to start four years of college in Tokyo, which effectively spells the end of the relationship.

However, it ends on even worse terms, when Izumi discovers that he has been having a passionate affair with her cousin, while she has been deferring a sexual relationship with him.

At 37, he learns that his betrayal permanently damaged her, so much so that she lives a life of isolation in an apartment block where all of the children are afraid of her.

He has ruined her life.

So ultimately the novel is concerned with the hurt we cause in the pursuit of our own needs and illusions.

A Lame Excuse for Stalking

Despite his capacity for hurt, Hajime has a sympathy for outsiders, non-conformists who don't quite fit in.

It reveals itself in his attraction to women who are lame, of whom there are several in the novel.

Just before he meets his future wife, Yukiko, when he is 28, he sees an elegant woman limping in the street.

He follows her for some time, wondering whether it is Shimamoto, until she enters a café, from where she phones someone for support.

The man who comes to her aid demands that he leave her alone and gives him an envelope with a large amount of money in it.

Meanwhile, the woman makes her escape in a cab, ramping up the mystery about her identity.

He can't believe his luck. Why did this happen? Did it really happen at all? What does it all mean?

If not for the envelope, proof that something must have happened, it would have continued to be a riddle, *"a delusion from start to finish, a fantasy I'd cooked up in my head, ... a very long, realistic dream that somehow I'd mixed up with reality"*.

For Hajime, as long as he has the envelope, it means that this whole event actually occurred, that his quest was real and not an illusion.

Everything Falls Into Place

At 30, Hajime marries Yukiko, after which they have two daughters and he establishes two jazz bars (one of which is called the "Robin's Nest" and the other we know only as "my other bar") at the prompting of his father-in-law.

Up to this point, Hajime has been relatively faithful, apart from "a few flings when Yukiko was pregnant", relationships that he seems to excuse in the same manner that his father-in-law justifies his own affairs (they allow him to let off steam and actually reinforce the primacy of marriage).

So much, so normal.

He seems to have developed a knack for stopping just short of being self-destructive.

Until one day his success results in some magazine coverage that reunites him with old school friends who trigger a sense of nostalgia for his past relationships.

And with this nostalgia comes Shimamoto.

Hollow Inside

Enough of the plot, I want to explore some of the metaphors.

To all intents and purposes, Hajime has been happy in his marriage:

"I could not imagine a happier life."

However, the emergence of Shimamoto makes him realize that he has been harbouring feelings about his past with her:

"Everything disappears some day. Like this bar...Things that have form will all disappear. But certain feelings stay with us forever."

To which Shimamoto responds:

"But you know, Hajime, some feelings cause us pain because they remain."

To this extent, she has a better insight into Hajime than he does himself.

Holding onto the past can create a darkness inside us that is destined to hurt not just ourselves, but those around us.

By the end of the chapter, he is looking into the mirror, confronting the fact that he has become a liar, that there is something dark inside him:

"For the first time in a long while, I looked deep into my own eyes in the mirror. Those eyes told me nothing about who I was."

It's an existential crisis of sorts, he is on the boundary of sanity and madness:

"If I never see her again, I will go insane. Once she got out of the car and was gone, my world was suddenly hollow and meaningless."

To the extent that Shimamoto is a twin of himself who completes the one person, she has gone missing and he is once again incomplete.

Missing Persons, Minding the Gap

So what to do about his hollowness and yearning?

Hajime falls in love with the idea that he and Shimamoto were "star-crossed lovers" who were simply born under a bad sign, whose love originally perished under an unlucky star, but can be revived:

"You could say I'm happy. Yet I've known ever since I met you again that something is missing. The important question is what is missing. Something's lacking. In me and my life. And that part of me is always hungry, always thirsting. Neither my wife nor my children can fill that gap. In the whole world, there's only one person who can do that. You."

He wants to overcome his hollowness by filling in the 25 year gap since they last saw each other:

"It's strange," she said, "You want to fill in that blank space of time, but I want to keep it all blank."

As Hajime swings between sanity and insanity, Shimamoto disappears and reappears.

Indeed, the reverse is also true: as Shimamoto disappears and reappears, Hajime swings between sanity and insanity.

She is both the focus of his sanity and the cause of his insanity.

She keeps his hopes alive with the promise that they will "probably" see each other in "a while".

Gradually, he realizes he has to do something about it, he has to account to his wife, Yukiko.

Only it doesn't come easily:

"I was struck by a violent desire to confess everything. What a relief that would be! No more hiding, no more need to playact or to lie...But I didn't say anything. Confession would serve no purpose. It would only make us miserable."

So the fear of misery justifies the continued deceit.

South of the Border, West of the Sun

The title of the novel is a lyric from a song played by Nat King Cole.

Both Hajime and Shimamoto had romanticized what might lie “south of the border”.

She thinks it is “something beautiful, big and soft”, only to discover when she grows up that all it refers to is Mexico.

So they realize that all of their romanticism is misplaced, it’s a fabrication.

Similarly, “west of the sun” describes a medical condition called “hysteria syberiana”, which affects farmers in Siberia.

After months of exposure to the harsh winter, they sometimes head off in search of some land west of the sun:

“Like someone possessed, you walk on, day after day, not eating or drinking, until you collapse on the ground and die.”

They succumb to their illusions and eventually die, because they fail to take care of reality.

So eventually Hajime realizes that Shimamoto is a distraction, perhaps even an illusion, that he must turn away from:

“I would never see her again, except in memory. She was here and now she’s gone. There is no middle ground. ‘Probably’ is a word you may find south of the border. But never, ever, west of the sun.”

At the same time, he realizes that the envelope has gone:

“I should have thrown that money away when I first got it. Keeping it was a mistake.”

To quote Shimamoto, “some feelings cause us pain because they remain.”

The envelope had to go, just as his feelings for her had to go.

Though there is a lingering doubt as to whether the envelope was ever real.

So ultimately we are forced to question whether the return of Shimamoto actually occurred or whether it was a fabrication of a mind that had gone lame.

Did Hajime’s self-delusion, his existential crisis, develop into a full on nervous breakdown, his own version of hysteria syberiana?

Did he just make it all up?

Was it just *“a very long, realistic dream that somehow I’d mixed up with reality”*?

Rain in the Desert, Rain on the Sea

Murakami also uses the metaphor of a desert which appears to be lifeless until it rains, when the dormant life revives and blossoms.

Hajime’s obsession with a relationship from the past transforms his marriage into a desert.

The darkness of his self-delusion sucks all of the life out of the reality of his relationship and his parenthood.

Yet Hajime can't sort it out from within his delusion.

So, in a way, Yukiko wins back their marriage with almost superhuman patience and insight and persistence.

She has to rain on the desert of their relationship.

Yet her effort isn't so much superhuman as quintessentially human.

She reveals that she too has had needs and gaps that she wanted to fill, that Hajime has ignored her needs and vulnerability, that he has been selfish to think he is the only one to have suffered from a hollowness.

Throughout the novel, the presence of Shimamoto is associated with rain or water, like some noir pulp fiction.

However, just as rain forces us inside to keep dry, it is also a source of water that revives life.

"South of the Border" finishes with Hajime contemplating a sea with rain falling on it.

Murakami is typically ambiguous.

There might be a sense in which rain on the ocean cannot revive dormant life, that the sea remains lifeless or unaffected beneath the surface, that it simply can't see that it is being replenished.

However, the ocean might also be a sea of possibilities, it is full of life and Hajime simply has to make a choice so that the rain can make a difference.

While Hajime contemplates all this, Yukiko comes and rests a hand lightly on his shoulder.

We get the sense that the two of them have together made a choice, that the "new life beginning tomorrow" that they have promised each other might just happen.

So whether or not the reappearance of Shimamoto was real or an illusion, she was the trigger for Hajime to realize that his marriage was the real thing and that he didn't need to seek something else "South of the Border, West of the Sun".

It's a lesson both to be with the one you love, and to love the one you're with, because they are usually, and should be, the same person.

Martine says

I never fail to be impressed by the way Murakami captures mood and feelings. Even in his less fantastic novels, of which this is one, he draws you into a world that is all his, and so full of possibilities and connections that you feel you could grasp them if you reached out. Except you don't, because in Murakami's universe it's easier to stay put and wait than to get actively involved. It's about memories and reminiscences, about wishes and alternate realities, and if you were to reach out and touch anything, you would break the carefully crafted atmosphere, leaving nothing but some loner's neurotic ramblings about the things he should have done but sadly never did. You wouldn't want to do that, now would you?

South of the Border, West of the Sun is set in a familiar Murakami landscape where lonely men listen to jazz and classical music, get obsessed with mysterious women with death in their eyes, and crave a connection with just one fellow soul. This time around, the protagonist is Hajime, a man in his late thirties who seems to be going through a bit of a mid-life crisis. Reasonably happily married and the successful owner of two jazz bars, Hajime seems to have it all, except for two things: he can't really connect to anyone, and he is haunted by memories of the women he has wronged. Most of all, he is haunted by the memory of his childhood friend Shimamoto, the only person in his life to whom he has ever been close, but of whom he lost sight at age twelve. And then Shimamoto suddenly reappears in his life, tempting him with promises of closeness and understanding and confusing him profoundly.

As stories of mid-life crises and marital infidelity go, this one is nothing out of the ordinary. It follows Hajime through his obsession with Shimamoto and his insecurities, regrets and justifications, leading him all the way to some modicum of self-discovery. So far, so generic adultery novel. What sets the book apart from countless other such books is its mood. Like other Murakami books, *South of the Border, West of the Sun* is a mood piece. It has a dreamlike, timeless quality, a mellow intensity, and a jazz-and-rain-fuelled melancholy which occasionally drips off the pages. It evokes loneliness and obsession in a way few other authors manage to evoke them. It's like being submerged in a bath of longing and nostalgia, and I, for one, really enjoy that sort of thing. There's something quite cathartic about it.

Much has been said about Hajime, the protagonist of *South of the Border*. Like many Murakami characters, Hajime is not an action hero; he spends most of the book waiting for fate to deal him a lucky card, and when he finally gets it, he doesn't really know what to do with it. Nor does he seem to notice that the cards he was initially dealt were actually quite good. He is a dreamer and a drifter, floating through a world in which he doesn't seem properly anchored, feeling rather than observing, longing rather than acting. He is haunted by memories and wallows in his own mistakes without having the guts to address them. He is not necessarily the world's most attractive protagonist, but all the same it is interesting watching the world through his eyes, sensing his guilt and sharing his cravings. And if he doesn't seem to be all that different from countless other Murakami protagonists, well, so be it. That's Murakami for you -- writing the same story featuring the same protagonist over and over again, but in a way which keeps you coming back for more.

As for Murakami's refusal to tie up the loose ends in this book, which seems to baffle certain reviewers, I like that. I like that we never find out exactly what Shimamoto has been up to for all these years. I like that her disappearance remains unexplained. I even like the fact that we never find out her first name (Hajime keeps calling her by her family name, even when they are having sex). It adds an air of detachment and mystery to the novel, which in turn just adds to its dreamlike quality. It allows you to fill in the blanks yourself, and at the end of the day, that is what I like most about good fiction -- its ability to make you fantasise and write parts of the story yourself. Maybe that's why I like Murakami so much; he draws me into brilliant moodscapes and leaves me there, thinking, feeling, wondering what I would do in a given position. Sometimes I wish I never had to leave his world, but alas, even the best jazz gets tedious after a while...

Orsodimondo says

DOPPIO SOGNO

Hajime, il protagonista e voce narrante, vuol dire "inizio": è nato il 1 gennaio 1950.
O qualche giorno dopo.
È figlio unico, circondato da coetanei che appartengono tutti a famiglie numerose.

Anche Shimamoto è figlia unica, e i due si scelgono, crescono insieme, anime gemelle, in simbiosi emotiva e sentimentale. Hanno dodici anni.

Shimamoto ha una gamba offesa dalla poliomelite, ha un padre con una ricca collezione di dischi e i due bambini crescono ascoltandoli: in particolare quello di Nat King Cole che dà il titolo al romanzo, *South of the Border, West of the Sun*. Crescono anche condividendo un'altra grande passione: la lettura.

Ma prima che il loro gemellaggio dell'anima si possa trasformare in qualcosa di più, e di diverso, possa aggiungere un lato sensuale ed erotico, Shimamoto trasloca, e le due anime si allontanano e perdono. Adesso hanno diciassette anni.

Hajime cresce, conduce una vita sessuale abbastanza intensa incrociando amori e storie (per esempio con la cugina della stessa fidanzata Izumi), fino al matrimonio con la madre dei suoi due figli. Il suocero è ricco e gli permette di coronare un sogno: aprire un jazz bar.

A questo punto, Shimamoto è a sud del confine della memoria di Hajime, oltre il raggio del ricordo, sparita perfino dal radar del sentimento.

Così crede Hajimi, così crediamo noi.

Ma così non è.

Ma così non è: perché quando vent'anni dopo, Shimamoto si presenta al locale di Hajimi, bella ed elegante, e con poche parole apre oceani di mistero oscuro che sapientemente dosa senza rivelare, tutto sembra possibile, Hajime è pronto a mandare all'aria la sua solidità familiare per buttarsi tra le braccia della sua amica d'infanzia, ora finalmente in grado di essere donna della vita.

Ma Shimamoto scompare di nuovo, come vent'anni prima. Scompare così all'improvviso che viene da chiedersi se sia mai riapparsa, se non fosse solo un'illusione. Se non sia stato tutto un sogno. E quindi, probabilmente, per Hajime lo scollamento tra desiderio/sogno e realtà è destinato a durare, a perseverare, il suo mondo ideale non si congiunge con quello reale: non gli resta che, novello Bovary, tornare all'ovile familiare ed essere riaccolto dalla moglie Yukiko, paziente tollerante comprensiva.

Il Giappone post 1945 era sconvolto dalla guerra, distrutto dall'atomica, un paese da costruire, più che ricostruire. Fare figli era parte di questo processo.

Così probabilmente s'inquadra la menomazione che Hajimi sente di aver subito crescendo figlio unico. Un aspetto che a me ha costretto a un quadruplo sforzo di comprensione, perché al contrario di Hajimi, io ho sempre desiderato, e sognato essere figlio unico.

Incontrare Shimamoto che è nella sua stessa condizione (evidenziata e simbolizzata dalla poliomelite) è un automatico istintivo immediato riconoscimento.

È probabilmente una propensione blues, da non intendere nel senso musicale, ma come inclinazione alla malinconia che li porta vicini, isolandoli dal resto del mondo.

Quanto siamo padroni del nostro percorso e quanto invece è già scritto? Dove riesce ad arrivare la nostra volontà, le nostre scelte deliberate, e dove invece subentra il caso, se non addirittura il destino?

Ricostruire, e raccontare, la trama di un romanzo di Murakami non è facile: in questo caso, però, il compito è meno complesso del solito. Perché in questo romanzo Murakami è meno sfuggente del solito, meno immerso nei suoi universi paralleli. Forse per questo, pur non essendo il suo più acclamato, è quello che io ho preferito, quello dove l'ho percepito maggiormente in grado di collegare i fatti con i sentimenti, la realtà

esterna con quella interiore. Qui i possibili intrecci degli altri universi esistenziali (ma per Murakami anche fisici) si racchiudono nel rimpianto: rimpianto di quanto non vissuto, non realizzato, non percorso. E, quindi, perduto.

Multiverso, realtà parallele, viaggio tra dimensioni...

Ahmed Oraby says

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Mutasim Billah says

".....the sad truth is that certain types of things can't go backward. Once they start going forward, no matter what you do, they can't go back the way they were. If even one little thing goes awry, then that's how it will stay forever."

South of the Border, West of the Sun is a short novel by Haruki Murakami. Here, we read the story of one Hajime's journey from childhood to middle age. The novel explores themes of post-war capitalism and culture in Japan in the 20th century, infidelity in relationships and unrequited love besides usual Murakami-esque themes of alienation, loneliness and longing.

The story gets its name from the Nat King Cole song by the name of *South of the Border*. Jazz music is a central to the themes in the story, as we sit back in dazzling jazz bars, sipping cocktails listening to Nat King Cole and Duke Ellington.

Meanwhile, *West of the Sun* part of the title refers to a disease called Siberian hysteria. In the text, Shimamoto describes Siberian Hysteria, a nervous disorder, using an analogy where as a farmer who operates on a dry and barren run with the horizon North, West, South and East. He conducts himself in the same routine day after day, year after year. Eventually he becomes hysteric, walking East until he faints from exhaustion and passes away.

Nat King Cole

Hajime was born in post-war Japan, at a time when the country's economy was thriving and a baby-boom happened, when the birth-rate was significantly high and the number of families with single child were rare. Hajime, being a single child, is shown to suffer from a degree of alienation due to this, and develops a relationship with books and music. In comes Shimatoto, also a single child, with whom he develops a friendship. Unfortunately, circumstances separate the two children at a young age.

"For a while" is a phrase whose length can't be measured. At least by the person who's waiting.

We watch Hajime spiral through life in his semi-isolation as he struggles with his longing for the past with Shimatoto. Eventually, she returns to his life, only Hajime is now 36, and a father of two. Shimatoto remains a metaphor for the what-ifs and what-might-have-beens of unrequited love.

I didn't enjoy this as much as some of Murakami's other novels. Yet it was a worthwhile read on 20th century Japanese culture and the trademark Murakami-soundtrack allowed me to finish the novel with relative ease. My lack of interest in the plot may be due to my inability to relate to the characters and themes in the story.

Happy reading!

Ivana Books Are Magic says

They say that Murakami is one of those authors you either love or hate. I can actually understand how his style of writing might not be for everyone's taste, but I happen to love him. His unique writing style always had a sort of hypnotic power over me. I feel enchanted when I read his novels, almost like I'm entering some magical world. Moreover, at times it is almost like I'm in the book myself, a silent observer, but nevertheless, a person very much present. Do you know that feeling you feel a part of a book right from the start? You only started reading it but you already feel immersed in it? When the first sentences draw you in completely? You've just started to read it, but you know you're going to love it. I don't know exactly how Murakami does it, but I could make a guess. It is the ease with which he creates his characters, revealing their inner world before our eyes in ever more detail with each page we turn. He is so brilliant at capturing the mood of his protagonists that we can't help feeling for them and feeling with them. At times it might even seem like we know his characters better than ourselves.

Both his writing style and the general mood of his books have something very unpretentious about them. Murakami writes simply but beautifully; it makes me wonder how he sounds in original (I doubt I'll ever become fluent in Japanese, so I will have to keep relying on translations). This simplicity and minimalism in writing works very well in this novel, adding another layer of sophistication to it. That is the world I would be tempted to use if I had to describe his books in one word: sophistication. His writing, for most part, doesn't seem lyrical to me, yet there are always those special moments when his writing style becomes amazingly graceful and poetical. He certainly has his signature style. Murakami uses metaphors and symbols with much ease, creating with them a thing of delicate beauty.

Murakami's exploration of theme of human loneliness can bring Kafka to our minds. Indeed, I can see many similarities between them, not just in the choice of themes explored but in the writing style as well. Kafka had this way of making surrealistic/fantastical elements in his work seem perfectly plausible. Murakami uses them in a slightly different way, he is more ambiguous, and when it comes to certain events, you're never quite sure whether the event being described is real or imagined. Both writers know how to employ fantastical/surreal to their advantage. Somehow those elements are employed so skilfully by these two writers, that they manage not only to deepen their descriptions of human loneliness and isolation, but give them additional meanings. Murakami's works feel a bit dreamier than Kafka's and they do have different styles but there are similarities between them, no doubt about that.

I was amazed at how easy I found it to sympathize with and feel for the protagonist of South of The Border, West Of The Sun. The protagonist of this novel, Hajimi, is not by any means a perfect man. It seems that he has a perfect life, though. Married with two children and a successful job- what man could want more? Yet,

underneath it all, Hajimi is somewhat unhappy and obsessed with his past. He owns jazz clubs, he is married to a woman who adores him, his marriage is by no means built on false pretences- and yet he is so utterly dissatisfied with something, it is like there is something deep inside of him, a worm of doubt eating up his life. If there was something in Hajimi's life that he hated, he could understand it, but there is mystery in his unhappiness, it runs deep. He is a happy man in many ways and he doesn't hide it, he feels grateful for it even, but there is always a but... both in life and in literature.

Some might see Hajimi as an irresponsible man undergoing a mid-life crisis, but I don't think it is so simple. This novel is much too complex for something like that. It feels more like a psychological study of character than just a story about some guy discontent with his life. The richness of this book is composed of many layers. One of them can certainly be found in its philosophical exploration of the human condition. What does it mean to be human? Why do we always want more? The existentialism is subtly played out in this one, much like music in a jazz bar, it echoes through the room until it becomes a part of you and nests itself somewhere deep in your heart. You either hate it or love it. That's the way with Murakami. People tend to either be utterly moved by his writing or feel it does nothing for them. Obviously, I fall into the first category. I agonized for and with the protagonist, perhaps even more than he did himself.

What (or whom) is Hajimi looking for, this man who seemingly has it all? Perhaps it all comes down to his past and a spirit of lost love (the most potent of spirits, right?). Hajimi grew up as a single child in a time when it wasn't usual for parents to have only one child. This turned him into an oddity of some kind, perhaps something that we would refer to (in Victorian, colonial and postcolonial literature) as 'an other'. However, he manages to find another 'other'- Shimamoto, a girl who is, like himself, a single child. Together these two finally feel complete, but unfortunately they lose touch when their families move away. This childhood friendship/ love continues to haunt our protagonist. Suddenly, Shimamoto reappears and Hajimi, now a married man, is captured under the spell of her mystery. As the years pass, Hajimi becomes more and more obsessed with Shimamoto.

Why is this old love so important to Hajimi? Because it is what itching fingers are to a painter. Many of my illustrating friends told me they feel it, a need to draw that is almost physical, you can actually feel your fingers itching, longing for a pencil even if you don't have a clear picture of what you would like to create in your head. For some people love might be like that. Like that physical and spiritual need for creation that artists feel. A yearning for the other that goes deeper than most romantic relationships. It is not so much sharing and friendship, as a creation of something new. Love, for some, might be that great mystery, that only thing that can give us fulfilment. Hajimi certainly doesn't idolize Shimamoto, he doesn't sing praises to her....He is just utterly and completely fascinated and drawn to her. It seems like something that is genuinely stronger than both of them. Can this connection between them be read as a metaphor for something else? Certainly it can, as a metaphor for great many things, but I suppose it is fair to say that it can also be an exploration of the theme of love itself. The mysterious connection between a man and a woman.

That would be the premise of this story. To discover what happens next, you'll have to read the novel. When you do that, you can draw your conclusions about the characters, the story and the message of this book. For me, one of the best things about this novel is that it can be read in so many ways. An existentialist might say that Shimamoto is just a symbol of the absurdity of this world, those more inclined to pessimism might add that Shimamoto represents the unattainable for happiness can't be achieved. Romantics might see it as a simple love story. A bitter cynic might say that Hajimi is a loser and that the novel is a quasi-intellectual masturbation (and a cynic would be wrong because bitterness is a bad method to read anything). A feminist might call Hajimi a pig (for mistreating the woman who not only worships him but is also the mother of his children). A psychologist might find reasons for Hajimi's behaviour in his upbringing. One possible psychological examination of Shimamoto and Hajimi's relationship could be those of 'unrelated siblings',

drawing parallel with Heathcliff and Catharine (it is a natural tendency in humans not to marry childhood friends because on unconscious levels we perceive them as siblings- because we grew up together). As I said, there many possible readings of this one. It is up to us to find a reading that we like best.

What I find so ingenious about this novel is the way it explores numerous question, from why our past holds such a power over us to why is every human being sentenced to an isolation of some kind? This book raises questions, rather than answers them, but it does it so brilliantly, that you feel like the answer must be attainable. I loved the honesty of this book, the unpretentiousness of it. At times, I had a feeling that Murakami was telling me: "I don't know the meaning of life and I can't tell it to you.", but in some instances I had a feeling I was seeing it with my eyes, in the story (in art) itself and that it is too complex a thing to put into worlds in a straightforward way. That is why we have art. That is why we have literature. To cross the bridges of everyday and banal worries to get to our cores, and examine them- as painful as it can be at times.

Jim Fonseca says

This novel starts out as a coming-of-age story of a young Japanese man. Like other Murakami novels we have cats, Western culture and music – both American pop and European classical music. To the cats we can add lame women because there are two in this story. Another major theme of this book is that the main character and several others are an "only child" and the characters discuss what this means. This makes a lot of sense in Japanese culture with its exceptionally low birth rate to the point where Japanese population is actually declining. (See below - by a million people in the last five years.)

There really isn't much plot. The young man is bored by his job as an editor but after he marries his wife's wealthy father sets him up as a nightclub owner. The young man finds his calling designing and opening night clubs in Tokyo. And buying BMWs.

As time goes on he becomes overly focused on thinking back to his early innocent relations with girls and trying to figure out what went wrong and what his life would have been like if he had stuck with another girl. He follows women around who remind him of this or that old girlfriend. Everyone thinks of these "alternate life scenarios" in passing but this man is obsessed by it. Even after he has a wife and child, a woman appears who reminds him of one of these earlier romances and he becomes obsessed with her.

As with some other Murakami novels I found the resolution of the story to be unsatisfactory. Introducing some amount of fantasy or mystery is great but you can't just leave us hanging at the end with absolutely no explanation of what was going on – why did the woman keep disappearing and where did she go? I felt that way about Murakami's IQ84.as well. In both novels the science fiction/fantasy part of the novel seemed tossed in just for the heck of it and didn't seem to be necessary to the plot. Still, I thought it was a good read and worth a 4.

Michael says

I was charmed by this sentimental novel of loss and regret over a childhood love of a boy for a girl when he was twelve. Hajime in his 30s finds his life empty and somehow inauthentic despite all the trappings of

success with a healthy family and a business running a couple of jazz clubs. He grew up in post-war Japan quite lonely and alienated, part of it he attributes to his being an only child, a situation made worse by stigma he felt:

...I hated it whenever someone asked me how many brothers and sisters I had. Just let them hear I didn't have any, and instinctively they thought: An only child, eh? Spoiled, weak, and self-centered, I betcha. That kind of knee-jerk reaction depressed me, and hurt. But what really depressed and hurt me was something else: the fact that everything they thought about me was true. I really was spoiled, weak, and self-centered.

But his world opened up when he befriended Shimamoto, who was also an only child and suffered a limp from polio. Murakami captures so well the wonder of this innocent childhood friendship free of sexuality in a way not possible in our current age. His fondest memories are of playing jazz records together, making each other laugh, and recounting their hopes for the future. But soon they went to separate schools and saw each other no more. Little was he to know how much this lost relationship would infect his identity and cast a shade on all his love relationships through the rest of his life.

Even after we stopped seeing each other, I thought of her with great fondness. Memories of her encouraged me, soothed me, as I passed through the confusion and pain of adolescence. For a long time, she held a special place in my heart. I kept this special place for her, like a Reserved sign on a quiet corner table in a restaurant. Despite the fact that I was sure I'd never see her again.

Hajime walks us through his painful adolescence and an honest look at his typical callous behavior in his sexual relations. A former high-school classmate drops by the bar and fills him in on a girlfriend he had jilted as a teenager for her hotter cousin. She now lives alone and appears zombie-like, which instills Hajime with remorse and guilt as the possible cause of her unhappy state. Something his friend says about a Disney documentary about the desert somehow epitomizes his current existential state of mind:

One generation dies, and the next one takes over. That's how it goes. Lots of different ways to live. And lots of different ways to die. But in the end that doesn't make a bit of difference. All that remains is a desert.

In this state of anomie and self-judgment, Shimamoto appears one day at his bar. If you are like me, you will be quite challenged to pin down what you would do in this situation. I think we can all identify with how Hajime struggles to do the right thing, fail in some ways and succeed in others. A simple story but so full of universal issues around our metaphors of love as a journey and love as a obsessive madness. Published in 1992, this tale stands out with Murakami's "Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki" from 2013 as a story free from his usual inclusion of magical realism elements.

Mohammed says

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Eddie Watkins says

This book is the literary equivalent of cloud paintings. I'm not talking John Constable's clouds, which are dense with specificity from a keen and earthy eye; but rather New Agey cloud paintings, which are designed to be innocuous and calming, to not stimulate the eye, to induce a meditative state and readjust the spirit and turn one away from the tangible.

So South of the Border, West of the Sun is not all bad – it does satisfy all the above criteria for New Agey cloud paintings – and I have no beefs with calmness and spirit clarifying, but that's not typically why I turn to art, whether it be paintings or literature. I typically turn to art to be engaged with the materials of that art. Of course I'm also interested in the overall effect of those materials, in the work of art per se, that unquantifiable essence of what has been accomplished; but I like this essence to be composed of tangible things, things I can chew on and wrestle with, things I can be viscerally engaged with.

This book is all essence and forced me to readjust my reading habits. I had to actually remove my focus from the words themselves, and to let them pass intact – like cloudy kidney stones painlessly through my urethra – through my reading eyes and brain and straight into my conceptualizing mind, where they formed something quite small for a novel of over 200 pages. The essence of this book is that “All things with form can vanish at any moment, but emotion abides”, an admirable enough concept that I wholeheartedly accept; but is that why I read, to ingest thousands of words that instantly vaporize in my mind leaving a paltry residue such as that? Zen koans can perform that feat in ten words or less. Again, **I turn to art to be engaged with the materials of that art.**

In his essay on marathon running Murakami refers to himself as boring, and now I'm inclined to believe him. The protagonist of this book is clearly a stand-in for Murakami, and is numbingly dull. He's a “successful” family man who likes jazz and to have his balls licked, not much of a Curriculum Vitae that, so it's augmented with a fixation on a girl he was friends with when he was 12. Granted, this is the “meat” (or rather tofu) of the plot, and is sweet and somewhat moving as it morphs through the vicissitudes of his life, though some of its impact was lost on me because now I don't quite *believe* Murakami. I don't believe he's in touch with an inner purity aglow with a spiritual innocence. I don't believe his romantic idealism. I don't believe in the transcendence of his imagination. I don't believe there are women who like to lick his balls. And not believing these things about him substantially lessened the impact of the main character's final transformation into the first stages of a complete and interesting being.

Which begs the question – who wants to read a book whose main character doesn't become interesting until after the final word?

But then is that possibly the point of this book? Given the delicate and profound beauty of the final image, and given the vapidity of the preceeding 200+ pages, is it possible that the book itself is an embodiment of the *essence* I previously pointed out; that the bulk of the novel itself represents the form destined to vanish and that the final emotionally charged image is what abides? I applaud Murakami if that is the case, at least for his conceptual gumption; but still I'd rather read a book that wasn't designed to be innocuous. Give me some meat on my words.

Kelly Jean Egan says

Whatever Murakami book I am reading, I find myself stepping back into the same world as before, with all of the same characters and themes of wells and transience and strangely poignant details like gold lighters and classical music records and the myriad spaghetti dinners--the mundane details of everyday life spun into a dreamy tapestry. The fact that every Murakami book I read seems to feel the same is a good thing in this author's case. His tone is something quite distinct. Every time I read him I feel I'm wrapping myself in a wispy cocoon of emotions and floating once again in that wistful introspection, melancholy, disassociation.

Nothing is permanent. Murakami captures Mono no aware amid the frenetic modern day Tokyo. His world is surreal and yet also emotionally filling--a perfectly imperceptible blend of fantasy and the real. The voice of the narrator is always the same, delving with an endearing, compelling introspection into the deep well of his psyche, and always doing so amid a rising urgency; in a race against time and the dissolution of the form of things; in a race against some phantom clock whose measure only the most sensitive can grasp and whose ticking threatens that all might be swept away with the next gust of wind. The sense of time in these novels is always strangely skewed--we are following a character for some time in a day to day mode, wherein a particular depth of thought suddenly holds us in mid-air, and suddenly we are jumping fifteen years, only to find the characters still dwelling in the past as though it were yesterday. Murakami achieves illusory momentums that give way to long bouts of ruminating stillness. Finishing the novel is like waking from a dream where you've just...yes you've just ... learned ...something.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Kokkyo? no minami, Taiyo? no nishi = South of the border, west of the sun, Haruki Murakami
South of the Border, West of the Sun is a short novel by Japanese author Haruki Murakami. Publication date: 1992. The novel tells the story of Hajime, starting from his childhood in a small town in Japan. Here he meets a girl, Shimamoto, who is also an only child and suffers from polio, which causes her to drag her leg as she walks. They spend most of their time together talking about their interests in life and listening to records on Shimamoto's stereo. Eventually, they join different high schools and grow apart. They are reunited again at the age of 36, Hajime now the father of two children and owner of two successful jazz bars in Aoyama, the trendy part of Tokyo.

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