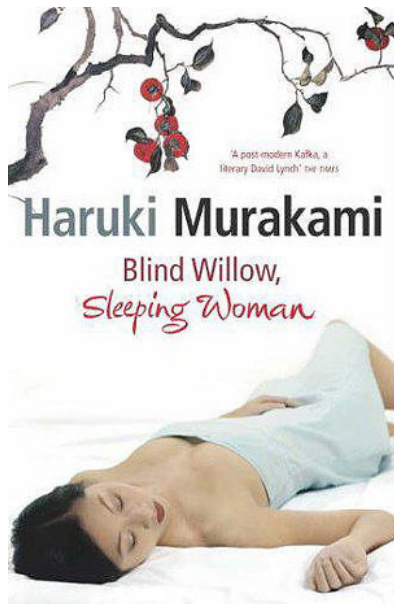


The weird and the beautiful



K. Kunhikrishnan



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“It is a beautiful thing to be able to tell stories to other people”, states the protagonist in “**A Folklore of My Generation**” in this short story collection* by the best contemporary Japanese writer. The stories were written in three decades, between interludes of writing novels and published in magazines like the **New Yorker, Granta** etc. Short story is a “kind of experimental laboratory” for Murakami, who concedes that not every short story is a masterpiece, as he can create one out of the smallest details- an idea, a word or an image.

In almost all the stories, the protagonist narrates in first person and the rationale is, “since I am a novelist people assume that anything I say or write must have an element of make believe. Granted, my fiction contains more than its share of invention, but when I am not writing fiction I don’t go out of my way to make up meaningless stories”. All the stories have the metaphorical elements of fantasy, illusion, bizarre, weirdness, strange vanishing, coincidences, loss of memory, puzzles of space and time, eerie animals, holiday resorts, beaches and so on. Manifestations of surrealism and metaphysical interpretations, profuse lacing with Beatles and jazz music mark his technique and craft, making compelling reading.

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The trouble with this collection is that it is a mixed bag of outstanding, good and the not so good stories. While some read like fables, with morals drenched in ambiguity, others do not live up to the Murakamian innovative idiom of poise and elegance. They are full of strange and striking twists and turns and with nuances of style and allusion.

The reader is taken for a ride when two stories are prototypes of the novels he wrote later! **Firefly** is expanded into the best selling **Norwegian Wood**, which sold 40 million copies and won him worldwide recognition beyond Japan. **Man Eating Cats** was developed into **Sputnik Sweetheart**. The only plausible explanation, absurd though, is that "if writing novels is like planting a forest, then writing short stories is like planting a garden". Murakami says he tests his new techniques in a short story for his next novel. "It is an experiment- a game"

Murakami draws plots from even from a dream that his wife had. **Ice Man**, typically weird, is based on a dream that his wife had. One woman falls for an iceman with icicle eyes and frost on his fingers, and marries him despite family reservations. The couple goes to South Pole, which turns out to be lonelier than anything she could imagine! The terrible image of marital solitude is symbolized.

The Seventh Man, an outstanding piece, is based on an idea that came to him watching the waves while surfing. It is about the loss of a childhood friend engulfed by a huge typhoon wave and the survivor obsessed with the burden for decades. He visits the spot and forgives himself and, "40 long years collapsed like a dilapidated house, mixing old time and new time together in a single swirling mass"(the swirling mass recurs in sequences from "**Kafka On The Shore**", Murakami's latest novel!)

Unexplained vanishing of characters into "thin air" is a paranormal repetition in his stories too. Mr. Kurumizawa, an executive in Merrill Lynch, mysteriously disappeared "somewhere between the twenty-fourth and twenty-sixth floors" in **Where I'm Likely To Find It**. A similar sweeping-away is portrayed in **A Poor Aunt's Story**, where "time, of course, topples everyone in its path equally". Unnatural elements of a light fingered monkey talking and stealing name tags ("Not just any name, mind you. I'll see a name that attracts me.....") and the girl forgetting her own name is the theme of **A Shinigawa Monkey**.

Murakami is also not without prejudices against the literary establishment in Japan. He does not fit in well even now and is accused of catering to the western and passing tastes of a young audience. **The Rise and fall of Sharpie Cakes** strongly digs at the old Japanese critics.

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There are brilliant stories in the collection, which have all the ingredients of the master story teller that Murakami is. **Hanalei Bay** is a moving story of a Japanese mother's annual return to the beach in Hawaii where her son died from a shark's attack while surfing.

Man Eating Cats is a nightmarish piece about an adulterous couple hiding in a Greek island, where he loses identity. **Tony Takitani** is about a technical artist marrying a woman loving clothes beyond reason. **Folklore for My Generation** is a sad love story, narrated when two friends meet in Italy after decades.

Hunting Knife is the mysterious story of a man in a wheel chair. These engaging stories, mingling fantasy and illusion with pedestrian images of daily life, reveal the magic of Murakami and why he is held in such high esteem.

* **Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman - Haruki Murakami**

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