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The Barbizon
A residential hotel for the New York 'career girl' **C11**

BOOKS
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. * * * *

Soho After Dark
Francis Bacon's painterly demimonde **C12**

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Real Isn't How She's Made

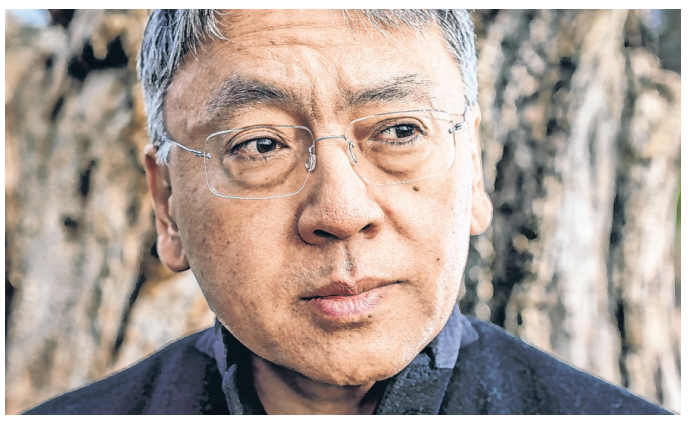
In Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel since becoming a Nobel laureate, a sickly girl bonds with her Artificial Friend, a sentient machine with exquisite powers of empathy.

Klara and the Sun
By Kazuo Ishiguro
Knopf, 303 pages, $28

By Sam Sacks

KAZUO ISHIGURO once offered a surprising comment about "Never Let Me Go," his novel—for those who haven't had it soldered into their memories—about cloned humans who lead relatively ordinary lives into young adulthood, at which point their vital organs are harvested and they die. "I thought it was a very cheerful book," Mr. Ishiguro said. "It's a very optimistic view of human nature. People laugh when I say that, and I think it's very unfair."

Writers often have idiosyncratic perspectives on their work, but I can think of few cases in which public interpretation seems to have diverged so widely from authorial motive. For many readers, the novel, with its disarmingly unaffected narration by a "carer" for organ donors (who will soon become a donor herself), is a work of quiet horror and heartbreak, in which the futility of cloned lives, as the New Yorker's critic James Wood wrote, "forces us to consider the futility of our own."



OF DUTY AND DECENCY Kazuo Ishiguro in 2015.

Yet to Mr. Ishiguro, the dystopian cruelty of his story's premise is a secondary matter. In the lecture he delivered in Stockholm after winning the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature, he says that the novel originated with the "central relationships triangle" of the three cloned friends. It is because of their comportment in the full knowledge of their fate—their thoughtfulness, their compassion toward each other, their loyalty and love—that he considers the book a celebration of humanity.

Who's right? Perhaps we have found a key to Mr. Ishiguro's phenomenal international success by recognizing his novels as open texts, able to accommodate multiple readings. Ironic contrast is a staple of his books. Set against a backdrop of civilizational cataclysm (the bombing of Nagasaki in "A Pale View of the Hills," for instance, or the genocidal Anglo-Saxon conquest in "The Buried Giant"), the action tends to dwell upon small, insular acts of duty and of decency. The latter are sometimes rationalized as mere distractions from the unpleasantness of facing the former. In Mr. Ishiguro's most famous book, "The Remains of the Day," the butler who has devoted his best years to serving a Nazi sympathizer is usually described as a case study in cowardly self-delusion. But the novel would have no pathos if we didn't also identify real virtues in the butler's sobriety, attentiveness and self-effacing discretion—qualities, not accidentally, that characterize Mr. Ishiguro's style of writing.

In his new novel, "Klara and the Sun," there is another uncertain meeting between the horrifying and the heartwarming. This is a return to the kind of science-fictional future of "Never Let Me Go." Klara, the narrator, is an AF, or Artificial Friend, and the story begins in the boutique shop where she is displayed for the privileged class of children who are expected to own such luxury companions. Klara is purchased for Josie, a sweet, sickly teenage girl who lives with her harried mother and a housekeeper outside the city. Klara's job is to keep Josie's spirits up as she battles her illness, and on the simplest level this is a fairy tale about the animating power of love between a child and her toy, similar to "The Velveteen Rabbit" or "Toy Story."

The comparison with children's entertainment is not meant as a put-down—Mr. Ishiguro clearly intends it—but readers may want to take it under advisement. Klara has a limited, naive comprehension of the world. Because she is solar-powered, she conceives of the sun as a benevolent deity she can supplicate to cure Josie's illness; she vows enmity to a piece of road-construction equipment that kicks up sun-obscuring dust. Only the restraint of the prose guards the scenes that elaborate her ingenuous belief system against becoming altogether cloying.

The prose, that is, and our awareness that Klara is not a magical plaything but instead a plausible development in artificial intelligence. Mr. Ishiguro has endowed her with an interesting mixture of strengths and weaknesses. Later, sleeker models of Artificial Friends, we learn, boast improved cognition and physical agility, whereas Klara struggles to negotiate unfamiliar settings. (Some of the most striking passages show her efforts to process complex visual stimuli, synthesizing fragments of external information into a unified whole.) What she possesses instead are exquisite powers of empathy. The novel is filled with her fine-tuned observations about the emotional states of the humans around her, particularly Josie. She develops an almost clairvoyant understanding of people's behavior as it bears on "their wish to escape loneliness"—to her the driving force in human life because it is precisely what she was programmed to help.

"Carers aren't machines," laments the narrator of "Never Let Me Go." "You try and do your best for every donor, but in the end it wears you down." But Klara needs only to stay charged and her single-minded devotion to Josie's well-being never flags. She is, in an eerie way, the apotheosis of Ishiguran humanity.

But though she has perfect antennae for feelings, she has virtually no comprehension of concepts like morality or justice. It is in this sizable blind spot that the novel's meanings bifurcate. Gradually a bigger picture of the speculative world coalesces. Automation has created a kind of technological apartheid state, which is reinforced by a dangerous "genetic editing" procedure that separates "lifted," intellectually enhanced children from the abandoned masses of the "unlifted." Josie is lifted, but the procedure is the cause of her illness, which is often terminal. Her oldest friend and love interest, Rick, is unlifted and so has few prospects despite his obvious brilliance. Her absentee father is an engineer who was outsourced by machines and has since joined a Community, one of the closed groups formed by those lacking social rank. In a conversational aside it is suggested that the Communities have self-sorted along racial lines and are heavily armed.

The novel proceeds along these concurrent tracks. In the foreground are delicately calibrated scenes marked by tenderness and individual courage. Behind the interactions lies a view of a Darwinist hellhole in which human life has been so thoroughly devalued—rendered fungible by technological advances—that parents routinely sacrifice their own children for social standing.

The dystopian side of things is familiar in the novel today. What is surprising, and even uncomfortable, about "Klara and the Sun" is how much Mr. Ishiguro wants to emphasize and honor the persistence of kindness amid it all. The story focuses on Josie's battle with her illness and the friends and family who, with Klara, rally around her. As though overcorrecting after the dark response to "Never Let Me Go," Mr. Ishiguro closes with a Hallmark-movie deus ex machina and a load of sentimental pabulum about "real and everlasting" love.

So: Is this a work of dogged hopefulness or subversive nihilism? Is Klara a paragon of fidelity or a tool of suppression? Are we meant to admire her or be disturbed by her uncanny reproduction of admirable behavior? Maybe the only thing we can take away for sure from this crafty and troubling book is the realization that the dichotomy between these either/or readings must be a false one. Nobody can be just one thing, either an optimist or a pessimist. The complexity of experience all but guarantees that everyone will be involved in goodness and evil simultaneously. That is the foundational paradox that, in Mr. Ishiguro's work, ceases to be paradoxical and becomes simply defining—both of humankind and of the strange creations it models in its image.

Mr. Sacks is the Journal's fiction critic.

Ready for Life in the Long Run

By Adrian Woolfson

ON ARRIVING IN London to seek his fortune, the rambunctious Scottish physician George Cheyne set about hobnobbing in coffee houses and taverns, where he ate "lustily" and swallowed down "much liquor." Before long, he had ballooned to nearly 450 pounds. In a state of existential crisis and discerning that his mortality was in the balance, he published a self-help manual, "An Essay of Health and Long Life" (1724). In this bestselling treatise, he singled out tea, coffee, chocolate and snuff as being especially detrimental to the human condition.

This seminal work, among others, spawned a tradition of books addressing the topic of longevity which continues to this day. While Cheyne and others contrived innumerable methods designed to maintain good health and extend lifespans, the process of aging has itself invariably been viewed as an immutable part of human nature.

Fresh research on the human genetic code unlocks an entirely new perspective on longevity.

No longer, says Andrew Steele in his entertaining and thoughtful book **"Ageless" (Doubleday, 352 pages, $29)**. While we wither and become frail after a mere seven or so decades, the humble Galápagos tortoise bumbles on healthily into a 175-year dotage. Capturing this trait—known as negligible senescence—is the holy grail of aging research.

So if, as Mr. Steele contends, "tortoises get old without getting elderly," might we not master "biological immortality" and become ageless too? Were this achievable, the existence of a bristlecone pine tree in California's White Mountains, estimated to be an extraordinary 4,850 years old, suggests that such potential extensions to our longevity might be more than mere tweaks. The fact that lifespans of different species vary so greatly—some mayflies emerge, mate and die within 5 minutes, while bowhead whales can live for more than 200 years—indicates that our lifespan is programmed by evolution, rather than restricted by insurmountable constraints.

"Ageless" follows biologist George C. Williams's simple evolutionary explanation for why we age, based on a phenomenon called "antagonistic pleiotropy." Put simply, genes selected to facilitate early successful reproduction may have detrimental effects as we get older. In Mr. Steele's words, it looks as if evolution has traded our "future health for increased reproduction." Were we able to roll the clock back and redesign ourselves, we would doubtless find alternative genetic circuits that did not have these unfortunate consequences. Perhaps one day, Mr. Steele conjectures, we will be able to reprogram our genomes to remove this legacy. Fortunately, there may be more immediately accessible paths to a longer life.

The significant extension of human longevity and our healthspan will, the Harvard biologist and entrepreneur David Sinclair informs us in his brilliant and enthralling book **"Lifespan" (Atria, 432 pages, $28)**, redefine what it means to be human. It may also

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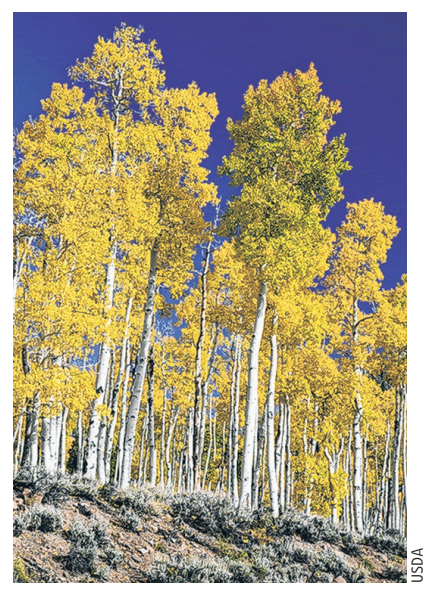

USDA

ANCIENT ACRE A quaking aspen grove in Utah is a single organism that has lived for thousands of years.