

# Voices of (Mis)Trust Unreliable Narration in the Works of Kazuo Ishiguro and Haruki Murakami

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<https://doi.org/10.33993/TR.2025.3.04>

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## Introduction

THE CONCEPT of the unreliable narrator highlights the inherent complexities of communication and trust. Miscommunication, it can be argued, is an intrinsic component of communication itself. Trust, however, serves as the foundational element of any relationship, including that between narrator and reader; deviations from trust are typically perceived due to its absence. The present paper aims to examine unreliability in Ishiguro's and Murakami's narration, how it impacts the reading experience and how it explores the psychological dimensions of the storyteller.

Unreliable narrators complicate the act of reading by creating a tension between surface-level narration and the underlying truth of each story. Thomas C. Foster argues that an unreliable narrator is a character that misleads the reader about the truth that resides in a story, while Wayne C. Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, defines an unreliable narrator as one who does not align with the norms of the work's implied author:

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*I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not* (Booth 1983, 158–159).

Similarly, M. H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, describes the unreliable narrator as one whose perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations deviate from the implicit norms and opinions expected by the author for an informed reader (Abrams 1993, 168).

There are two categories of unreliable narrators: those who intentionally deceive and those who, despite their intent to convey truth, fail due to various limitations. The latter may suffer from emotional bias, a lack of insight, or an inability to accurately interpret events (Nünning 2015, 27). In first-person autobiographical narratives, the tension between the “experiencing self” (the protagonist) and the “narrating self” (the storyteller) is particularly pronounced. As Franz K. Stanzel observes, this tension arises from the dual roles played by the narrator, who is both hero and storyteller (Stanzel 1984, 212). Dorrit Cohn extends this idea, arguing that in first-person narratives, the relationship between the narrator and their past self reflects an existential unity, imitating the temporal continuity of real human existence. This existential connection contrasts with the functional relationship typical of third-person narrators and their protagonists (Cohn 1978).

Unreliable narrators thus serve as a lens through which readers can explore the psychology of the narrator, the character (if the narrator is a character), and, by extension, the implied author and reader. Murakami’s and Ishiguro’s narrators exemplify this dynamic, often misinterpreting their worlds to avoid confronting painful truths. Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* (1992) frames the unreliable narrator as a reflection on the limits of human knowledge and the subjective nature of truth. This narrative approach externalizes internal conflicts, enabling readers to examine characters’ psyches through their distortions of reality.

## A Comparative Analysis of Narrators: Ishiguro and Murakami

**K**AZUO ISHIGURO and Haruki Murakami, two of the most prominent contemporary authors, are known for crafting narrators whose perspectives significantly shape the narrative world. Both authors explore themes of memory, identity, and reality through narrators whose unreliability challenges readers to discern the truth beyond their subjective interpretations. However, the ways in which Murakami and Ishiguro approach their narrators reveal distinct thematic and stylistic preoccupations.

## Ishiguro's Narrators: Self-Deception and Emotional Complexity

ISHIGURO'S NARRATORS are defined by their introspection and emotional complexity. Beyond portraying unreliability, Ishiguro's narrators invite readers to empathize with their limitations. The narrators' psychological frameworks and the reasons for their unreliability—be it self-deception, cognitive constraints, or emotional turmoil—are integral to their identities. Readers often move between acknowledging the narrator's flawed interpretation of reality and choosing to engage with their perspective to fully grasp the story's emotional and thematic depth.

As seen in *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021), these narrators often engage in self-deception to avoid confronting painful truths. While Murakami's narrators accept the surreal as a given, Ishiguro's narrators struggle to reconcile their subjective interpretations with an external reality that they often misread.

Ishiguro's narrators are often caught between their experiencing and narrating selves, creating a tension that underscores their unreliability. For instance, Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* presents a distorted view of his past, shaped by his commitment to duty and his repressed emotions. Kathleen Wall, in her article "The Remains of the Day and its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," argues that Stevens's narrative style—characterized by defensiveness, denial, and verbal tics like shifts between "I" and "one"—signals his unreliability. His distorted views on Lord Darlington's morality, his repressed feelings for Miss Kenton, and his self-delusion regarding his own life exemplify this unreliability. Readers experience the tension between Stevens's interpretation of reality and the reality inferred through his narration, creating the "pleasure of deciphering" described by Wall.

Published after *The Remains of the Day*, *The Unconsoled* (1995) defies conventional narrative structures, employing a surreal and fragmented approach. Ryder, a renowned pianist, arrives in an unnamed European city for a pivotal performance. Plagued by amnesia, he navigates a labyrinthine world filled with disjointed interactions, blurred timelines, and enigmatic figures from his past. Ryder's inability to comprehend his surroundings mirrors the community's collective despair. Ishiguro uses this dreamlike narrative to compress the experience of a lifetime into a few days, challenging readers to interpret Ryder's fragmented psyche.

Memory, a recurring theme in Ishiguro's works, takes on new dimensions in *The Unconsoled*. Ryder's amnesia and extrasensory perceptions create a disorienting blend of awareness and ignorance. Ishiguro explains that the novel's dreamlike quality reflects the disjointed nature of human experiences, where

individuals often grapple with attachments and responsibilities without fully understanding how they arrived at them (Shaffer 2008).

*Klara and the Sun* introduces Klara, a solar-powered robot programmed to care for a sick child named Josie. Initially perceived as an objective observer, Klara's reliability diminishes as her limited understanding of human emotions and her algorithmic reasoning become apparent. Her belief in the Sun's healing power and her innocent efforts to comprehend human behavior make her an endearing but limited narrator. Klara's limited understanding of human behavior in *Klara and the Sun* adds layers of poignancy and complexity to her narration. Unlike Murakami's narrators, Ishiguro's characters often exhibit a heightened awareness of their limitations, which paradoxically deepens their unreliability.

The narrative's early portrayal of Klara as a dispassionate observer gradually gives way to an exploration of her emotional and cognitive constraints. Her interactions with Josie and her environment reveal her deep desire to emulate human emotions, highlighting the intersection of objectivity and unreliability. Klara's innocence and awareness of her limitations evoke empathy, underscoring Ishiguro's exploration of the human condition through non-human eyes.

### **Murakami's Narrators: Fragmented and Passive Observers**

MURAKAMI'S NARRATORS are often detached individuals who navigate surreal and dreamlike worlds, serving as proxies for readers in exploring the enigmatic and inexplicable. These narrators, typically presented in the first person, act as passive observers in their stories, reacting to reality rather than driving the plot forward. Their unreliability stems less from intentional deceit and more from their limited understanding of the surreal forces around them, combined with their introspective yet fragmented worldviews.

Memory and identity are central themes in Murakami's work, with narrators often grappling with amnesia, repressed memories, or an inability to fully comprehend their roles within the narrative. Their unreliability emerges from a disjointed perception of time and space, as well as an existential detachment from the world around them. This sense of fragmentation reflects Murakami's preoccupation with the inner workings of the human mind and the elusive nature of truth.

For instance, in *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), Kafka Tamura is a 15-year-old runaway whose narration alternates between lucid, grounded observations and a descent into the fantastical. His interactions with characters like Nakata—a man who can communicate with cats—highlight a surreal parallel reality that Kafka can neither fully comprehend nor explain. His unreliable perspective is marked

by lapses in memory and blurred boundaries between his conscious reality and symbolic dreams, which often carry mythological undertones.

Similarly, in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994–1995), Toru Okada's detached and stoic narration underscores his increasingly fragmented sense of self. After his wife mysteriously disappears, Toru is drawn into a labyrinthine journey involving metaphysical wells, alternate dimensions, and inexplicable encounters with characters who defy logic. Toru narrates his experiences in a calm and almost indifferent tone, even as the reality around him disintegrates. His unreliability is rooted in his passive acceptance of the surreal, leaving the reader to grapple with the ambiguity of events that might be psychological projections or supernatural occurrences.

In *Norwegian Wood* (1987), the narrator, Toru Watanabe, presents a more grounded narrative, yet his unreliability manifests in his nostalgic and selective recounting of the past. The novel's melancholic tone is shaped by Toru's fragmented memories of his relationships, particularly with Naoko and Midori, and his struggle to make sense of loss, love, and identity. Unlike the surreal narrators in Murakami's other works, Toru's unreliability lies in the subjective nature of his recollection, tinged with the emotional weight of grief and the passage of time.

In *1Q84* (2009–2010), the narrators Aomame and Tengo offer dual perspectives on a world that has diverged from reality into an alternate timeline. Aomame, an assassin with an unwavering belief in her mission, narrates with a sense of precision that contrasts with the increasing surrealism of her experiences, such as encountering the enigmatic Little People. Tengo, on the other hand, is a writer whose work begins to manifest, further blurring the line between fiction and life. Both narrators exhibit gaps in their understanding of the strange world they inhabit, inviting readers to piece together the larger narrative through their fragmented viewpoints.

Murakami's narrators often find themselves in liminal spaces where the boundaries between reality and the subconscious dissolve. Their passivity, introspection, and frequent detachment mirror existential isolation, reflecting Murakami's thematic exploration of the human condition. Whether grappling with surreal events or the unreliability of memory, these narrators draw readers into an enigmatic world that demands active interpretation while leaving many questions unresolved.

## Conclusion

**T**HE NATURE of unreliability differs significantly between Murakami and Ishiguro. In Murakami's works, unreliability is rooted in external surreal forces, memory lapses, and fragmented identities, with narrators typical-

ly refraining from imposing coherence and instead allowing mysteries to unfold naturally. By contrast, Ishiguro's narrators exhibit unreliability due to internal conflicts, self-delusion, and cognitive or emotional limitations, often striving to impose a sense of narrative coherence that readers gradually come to question.

Murakami and Ishiguro's narrators engage with reality in contrasting ways. Murakami's narrators often inhabit liminal spaces where the line between reality and the subconscious blurs, with the surreal seamlessly integrated into their lives. By contrast, Ishiguro's narrators remain within a more grounded reality but misinterpret or distort it due to their personal limitations, creating a tension between their perception of the world and its actual nature.

McHale links the unreliable narrator to the broader questioning of truth and reality in postmodern literature (McHale 1987). The role of the reader differs significantly between Murakami and Ishiguro. In Murakami's works, readers are encouraged to embrace ambiguity and mystery, joining the narrator's journey without expecting a clear resolution. On the other hand, Ishiguro's readers take on a more active role, working to uncover the truth by navigating the discrepancies between the narrator's perspective and objective reality and being empathetic with the narrator (Hopârtean 2018).

The emotional resonance in Murakami and Ishiguro's works is strikingly different. Murakami's narrators, often detached, reflect the existential isolation of modern life, eliciting a contemplative and meditative emotional response. By contrast, Ishiguro's narratives carry higher emotional stakes, as his characters confront deeply personal conflicts and nostalgic loss, both representative of his fiction (Hopârtean 2019). Readers are drawn into their inner struggles with memory, identity, and moral responsibility, experiencing these dilemmas alongside them.

Both Murakami and Ishiguro use unreliable narrators to explore human limitations and the nature of truth, yet their approaches reflect different aspects of postmodern skepticism. Murakami's narrators embody this fragmented reality, immersing readers in surreal landscapes that challenge the very nature of truth, where certainty is elusive. By contrast, Ishiguro's narrators ground their unreliability in deep emotional and psychological complexity, reflecting the inner conflict and self-perception that define the human experience. While Murakami's narrators unravel the mysteries of the external world and the subconscious, Ishiguro's explore the complexities of personal truth and internal struggle, within the dichotomy of being authentic and unreliable (Hopârtean 2021). Together, their works push the boundaries of narrative authority and highlight the fragmented, uncertain nature of postmodern existence, offering profound insights into the human condition.



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## Abstract

Voices of (Mis)Trust: Unreliable Narration in the Works of Kazuo Ishiguro and Haruki Murakami

This paper examines the role of unreliable narrators in the works of Kazuo Ishiguro and Haruki Murakami, exploring how narrative unreliability shapes readers' engagement and reflects psychological and existential dimensions. Ishiguro's narrators often exhibit self-deception and emotional complexity, grappling with memory, identity, and moral responsibility within grounded realities. Murakami's narrators, by contrast, navigate surreal, fragmented worlds, their unreliability arising from introspection, detachment, and partial comprehension of the fantastical. By comparing these narrative strategies, the study highlights the diverse ways unreliability interrogates truth, perception, and human limitations, revealing the authors' distinct approaches to postmodern skepticism and the interplay between narrative authority and reader interpretation.

## Keywords

unreliable narrator, narrative authority, memory, identity, postmodern literature, self-deception, surrealism, reader engagement