

5. MURAKAMI HARUKI'S SYDNEY DIARY

Leith Morton

This paper will focus on a single volume by acclaimed Japanese author Murakami Haruki (for the purposes of this paper, I will adopt Japanese name order, with surname first) and his *Shidonii!* (*Sydney!*), published in January 2001 by the Bungei Shunjû company in Tokyo. Three-quarters of this 409-page book consists of Murakami's *Shidonii Nisshi* (*Sydney Diary*), which records in 23 daily entries the minutiae of his life in Sydney and his observations of the Sydney Olympics. The book also contains many reflections on Australia and its life and culture.

Murakami is the most popular writer of serious fiction in Japan, having broken the magic four million sales barrier for his 1987 hard-cover novel *Noruei no Mori* (*Norwegian Wood*). This record still stands in Japan. (Incidentally, despite having been translated into English soon after publication, only last year a new, different English translation of this novel appeared.) So it is safe to say that Murakami's *Sydney Diary* will be read by a very large number of Japanese readers, as all of his books have been. If anyone is capable of 'creating' for Japanese the image of Australia in the 21st century, that person is Murakami.

Before embarking upon a discussion of his *Sydney Diary*, I will briefly sketch an outline of Murakami's career to date.

He was born in Kyoto in 1949 and grew up in the salubrious surroundings of seaside Kobe. He went to Tokyo for his degree and graduated from the literature and theatre school of Waseda University in 1975. His graduation thesis was on the journey motif in American cinema. Murakami was an American specialist and, even after becoming a full-time writer in 1981, he continued a career as a translator of some of the greatest modern American writers into Japanese. His translations include works by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, Raymond Carver, John Irving and Tim O'Brien.

Murakami has won most of the major Japanese literary awards. His best-known novels include the trilogy 1979 *Nen no Pinbōru* (1979. *Pinball*, 1980), *Hitsuji o Meguru Bōken* (A Wild Sheep Chase, 1982) and *Dansu Dansu Dansu* (Dance, Dance, Dance, 1988). He has also written much non-fiction, including his well-known study of the Sarin gas attack by the Aum terrorist group on the Tokyo subways, *Undōguraundo* (Underground, 1997). All of his major novels — which have now sold into double figures — and some of his non-fiction have been translated into English. Already two books in English have been written on Murakami and, no doubt, there will be many more. He has lived overseas for long periods — mostly in Europe and the US — often in an attempt to escape media attention. One important fact to keep in mind for the purposes of this paper is Murakami's excellent reading and speaking skills in English.

Passing, fugitive references to Australia occur in some of his fiction, rather like distinguished French novelist George Perec's (1936–82) use of Australian names in his writing, and Umberto Eco's famous essay on the platypus. That is, Australia is a source of exotica, so the odd kangaroo bounding through Murakami's fiction simply reminds us that for most non-Australian intellectuals, Australia represents a mythic land of exotic beasts located at the end of the Earth. As far as I am aware, the visit to the Olympics was Murakami's first trip to Australia.

Murakami has, however, written on the Olympic Games before: in 1987, he published a volume called *The Scrap* — *The*

Good Old 1980s in which he constructed a portrait of the US during the '80s by combing American magazines and newspapers from the era for interesting stories. He comments in the form of a diary on the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Murakami has also written travelogues before. In 1990 and 1991 he published, first, a book on his three-year residence in Europe from 1986 to 1989, and, second, a book on his travels in Greece and Turkey. In addition, in 1998, he published a volume entitled *Henkyō Kinkyō (Borders Near and Far)* containing essays on his travels in the US, Mexico and Inner Mongolia, where he visited Nomonhan — the site of a famous battle between the Soviet Union and Japan in 1939. This event forms the centrepiece of his 1994 mega novel, originally published in four volumes in Japanese, *Nejimaki Tori Kuronikuru (The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle)*. So Murakami did not come to the Sydney Olympics without significant experience of writing travel literature and an Olympic diary.

As he notes in his postscript to the volume, however, his *Sydney Diary* was the first time he had written so much in such a short time. At several places in the text he tells us that he is typing his reportage of a specific event on his laptop at the venue while the event is taking place. As Murakami puts it, this is 'real-time' writing, although not all of the diary entries are composed in this way. Most were written at night in his hotel after the day's events were concluded. Also, it is important to note that it is a real diary — he records what he had for breakfast on each of the 23 days of his diary, how much it cost, what the weather was like while he was jogging or bike-riding around the Sydney Opera House and Botanical Gardens (his regular morning route), how long it took him to complete the circuit and what clothes he wore on the day. Thus, the diary is an intensely personal document, and Murakami's diary persona (which bears a strong resemblance to the eponymous hero — simply called 'boku' or 'I' — who appears in many of his fictional narratives) becomes the reader's friend.

This paper concentrates on the picture of Australia that Murakami draws, not on the text as a whole, which deserves at

least another paper. If I was to write such a paper, my interest would focus on the text and, in particular, its narrative structure, as a species of 'life-writing' or 'autobiographical fiction', a genre which has become one of the dominant modes of late 20th-century writing. There is no doubt that the intimate, frank portrait of Murakami painted in this book presents a compelling subject for readers, and projects a reader who can get to know this most famous of contemporary Japanese authors on a personal, intimate level. But such analysis is better left for another day.

In the book itself, Murakami makes a few passing references to his fame: the interview with the literary columnist of the *Australian*, an interview with a Korean TV journalist, the way in which the journal and the publisher sponsoring and paying for Murakami's visit respond to his every need immediately. Tickets that can be bought only from scalpers for exorbitant prices for events such as the opening and closing ceremonies and the 400-metres final involving Cathy Freeman, are all obtained for Murakami instantly. His expensive laptop is replaced by his benefactor the day after it is stolen from his Sydney hotel room. His benefactor, or should we say 'minder', is employed by the publisher. However, all these references are made openly — Murakami is staggered by the munificence of his sponsors — or so it is made to appear — he can't believe how much these tickets cost.

Murakami repeatedly tells us how much he dislikes the Olympics, and how appallingly boring most of the events are. At one point, he writes the word '*taikutsu*' (boring) several times in the one sentence in case we haven't got the idea. Naturally, this criticism of the Olympics is balanced by mention of the strange paradox that it is, nevertheless, astonishingly compelling, and Murakami has no regrets whatever about being despatched all the way from Japan to the end of the world to report on the event.

So we are given to understand as readers that this is one man's, one writer's, view of the Sydney Olympics and Australia in general: Murakami revels in his own idiosyncracies. Several

times he notes, dear reader, you may well have a completely different view of the Olympics from your TV viewing, and your view may be the correct one. My opinion is that while this kind of rhetoric may protect Murakami against criticism of his reporting as subjective rather than objective, the real motive for it lies in the creation of a cantankerous, maverick friend called Murakami who is so intimate with his readers that he will disclose to us exactly what he really thinks, just as a close friend should. In other words, it is a rhetorical strategy (probably a perfectly sincere one) designed to create a special kind of relationship between author and reader, one which goes far beyond mere journalism.

Let us now examine specific segments of the text to ascertain exactly how Murakami 'creates' Australia for his Japanese audience, and what kind of Australia he has created. I should note before commencing this analysis that the bulk of the diary entries are concerned overwhelmingly with meticulous descriptions of various Olympic events in which Murakami is interested — especially the men's and women's marathon. Only three or four diary entries out of the 23 concentrate on Australian life and culture; other observations on Australia emerge just in passing.

Also, I will mostly exclude the numerous mentions of Australian flora and fauna that Murakami seeks in koala parks, zoos and museums, preferring to emphasise instead his analysis of Australian history and society. It is worth noting, however, that there are a number of two- or three-page digressions on topics of particular interest — koalas, sharks, shark attacks, poisonous snakes and spiders, bushfires — which usually incorporate much detailed information gleaned from various reference works on Australian mammals, reptiles and so on. This information appears to derive from various reference works by authors such as Eric Rolls, Gerry Swan and Terence Lindsay purchased at bookshops and museums (which are listed in the bibliography).

Like the early European explorers of Australia — whose accounts Murakami has read in Tim Flannery's 1998 volume

The Explorers, which he cites now and again — Murakami comments several times on how strange and weird the Australian landscape is. The view from the aeroplane flying over the vast deserts of Australia is, he says, 'like a Tim Burton movie'; he is transported to another dimension (p.50).¹ He notes that Australia is the hottest, driest continent and recounts the migration in antiquity of marsupials and Aborigines from other land masses to this sunburnt country (p.51). The western suburbs of Sydney, however, are less romantic; the view from a train trip before the games begin reveals a crumbling, faded cityscape (p.62). This comment comes from the entry for 12 September, when Murakami journeyed to Parramatta to see the Olympic flame relay.

The didactic design of the novelist can be seen in his mini-history of Parramatta from its first Aboriginal settlement through colonial times to the present. Clearly, Murakami is intending to educate his audience about Australia. He also lets us know that 'strine' puzzled him at first but his ears quickly make the adjustment and, for the rest of his stay, he has no trouble understanding Australian English, although he discusses its peculiarities from time to time, notably the habit of abbreviating everything: salt-water crocodiles, he writes, are called 'salties' (pp.60–73).

Murakami's analysis of the symbolism of the opening ceremony on 15 September is insightful. He sees the panorama as an attempt to promote a post-reconciliation brand of patriotism — to do away with memories of the convict past and the dispossession of Aboriginal lands by white settlers. These observations follow a mini-history of Homebush (the site of the Olympics), in which Murakami outlines the history of white exploitation of Aborigines. For him, such a politically correct version of patriotism is tendentious but also rather countrified. His comment on the theatre of the opening ceremony is that it is a load of 'bucolic mummery' (pp.95–100), although he later admits that the architectural excellence of the main stadium surprised him, saying there is nothing as sophisticated as this in Japan.

On 19–20 September, he drives up the coast to Brisbane in a Ford Falcon with a friend to see Japan play Brazil in a preliminary soccer match. He is staggered by the vastness of the territory — and a massive bushfire he encounters on the way. A country cop who pulls him over for speeding is proud of this bushfire, which has been burning for a week. Apart from his shock at how law-abiding Australian motorists are — Japanese drivers always speed on highways, and no one cares, he says — he is intrigued by the Australian attitude towards bushfires. After enjoying the luxury of a five-star hotel in Brisbane, he journeys to the soccer match. The stadium is full of young Japanese waving Rising-Sun flags. Murakami reflects that, although this is uncontroversial now, how many of the same Japanese youth would be aware of the Japanese bombing of Darwin in World War II, and the casualties that resulted (pp.146–177)?

Apart from the casual mention of Australian novels he is reading, such as Patrick White's *Voss* and Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, it is clear that Murakami gains most of his information from newspapers. As part of his morning routine, he trots to the nearby convenience store to buy copies of the local papers — *The Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* — which he reads from cover to cover, and cuts out articles of interest to peruse further at night. He frequently quotes from the papers — summarising their daily content for his readers. One topic that he mentions several times in the lead-up to Cathy Freeman's victory in the 400-metres final on 25 September is the hate mail she attracts from newspaper readers who object to her lighting the Olympic torch or, after her win, brandishing the Aboriginal flag. In his entry for 26 September, he analyses the pressure on her and disagrees with criticisms of her assertion of Aboriginality.

The most detailed analysis of Australia in his book comes with the 13-page entry on 28 September in which Murakami styles a short history of Australia — from the First Fleet to the Olympics — from the perspective of a disturbed individual, that is, Murakami. For this entry, he obviously drew upon Flannery's

research as well as Geoffrey Blainey's *Short History of Australia*, which is cited in its original edition and the Japanese translation. He notes that half of the convicts on the First Fleet committed serious crimes — they were not all Fenian rebels. But the fact of Australia being founded as a penal colony determined its destiny; this was in contrast to the US. The American rebels deliberately broke their ties with Britain to pursue their separate dreams.

Australia — here Murakami uses the metaphor Mother England and her faithful child — and, especially its ruling class, tried to win its mother's affection by volunteering to fight in war after war which had no connection with Australia: the Sudan conflict, the Boer War, World War I and so on. He describes the huge Australian losses in the Gallipoli campaign as a sacrifice to erase the convict stain. But when Britain sent its forces to Europe to fight Hitler, and thus abandoned Australia, Australia was forced to turn to its elder brother, the US, for help. In the postwar era, Australia became America's deputy sheriff in the region. For Murakami, this clinging to other nations for security reveals Australia's anxiety over its identity, its failure to articulate its own sense of destiny (pp.273–281).

From Australia's participation in the Vietnam War, however, and the strong opposition to the conflict that emerged at the time, a new sense of identity was born. Murakami links this to the birth of the multicultural ideal in Australia. Returning to his Freudian metaphor, he argues Australia conquered its childish separation trauma and grew up to develop mature relations with its Asian neighbours. The one remaining thorn under the skin of Australian identity was the question of Aborigines. Murakami notes that they were not counted in the census as citizens until the 1960s. Australia's attempts to impose its own standards of human rights on its Asian neighbours failed because of this blatant hypocrisy, he argues. Once Australia moved towards reconciliation and celebrated National Sorry Day, then, in this respect as well, Australia began to mature as a nation. This leads him to Cathy Freeman.

Her maternal grandmother was a victim of the Stolen Generation. At the root of this policy, Murakami discerns an economic motive. The politics of racial separation were designed to create a cheap serf caste of Aboriginal labourers and stockmen. He discusses the failure of High Court cases to recompense Aborigines for their suffering arising out of being forcibly separated from their parents. Murakami describes the verdict of the Supreme Court of NSW in the Joy Williams case as a 'political judgment'. He asserts that the pain and suffering endured by Freeman's grandmother as a result of her forced separation from her mother affected Cathy's entire family, and this same pain resides deep in Cathy's heart (pp.281–284).

The source of this information was an interview Freeman gave to an English newspaper earlier in 2000. So Murakami views Cathy's tears at the 400-metres awards ceremony (noting that she hardly expressed any emotion prior to this) as emblematic of reconciliation. The tears in the eyes of the Australians in the stadium watching the ceremony he interprets as a sharing of her pain. Cathy Freeman, he wrote, is a kind of female shaman enduring catharsis for the sake of the nation. Murakami himself was deeply affected by this and wept as well — in this sense, the Sydney Olympics is a spiritual turning point, a milestone in the history of Australia (p.284).

The only other entry in which Murakami offers a sustained analysis of Australian society is towards the end of his three-week sojourn in the country. In the entry for 2 October, he observes that Australians love a party and, as the quality of their food is superior to the US and Britain (and cheaper), why not? This leads Murakami to an analysis of Australia as a quarry to the world (with Japan as its biggest customer). The fact that, historically, Australia is a mineral treasure trove has led to the easygoing, relaxed mode of Australian life — it gave rise to the idea of the lucky country.

But, writes Murakami, with the sophisticated mining technology now available, Third-World countries can export mineral resources to Asia more cheaply than Australia, thus Australia's resource-export dependent macro-economy is in

a long-term decline. This is now becoming apparent in the growing trade deficit. Murakami fears Australia's happy-go-lucky character will inevitably change — the Olympics brightened the gloom for a tiny moment (pp.331–345).

My reading of Murakami's observations is that, given that he was in the country for only three weeks, his opinions are better informed than most, and better expressed than often is the case for the few Japanese intellectuals who have written about Australia. In fact, his professionalism shines through — doing so much research in just three weeks, even if it was mostly scrutinising the daily newspapers with a fine-tooth comb. Perhaps his take on Cathy Freeman as a spiritual medium, symbolising in her victory the triumph of reconciliation, is a tad too romantic but, on the other hand, Murakami might respond that you had to be there in the stadium at that moment. The poetic power of the novelist's fine prose style is revealed here to good effect, and it is, after all, the artist who is our contemporary myth-maker, and thus the custodian of the future.

Murakami's mixed prose style, which varies tenses and register according to the entry, discloses how his diary was composed: sometimes while he was watching an event and sometimes later. It also creates a marvellous sense of verisimilitude which further acts to strengthen the sympathetic persona of the author: a harried, harassed journalist doing his best for his readers. It is noticeable that Murakami was accredited as a journalist for the games, and had the wide access granted to journalists. He reminds us at the end of his book of one of his cultural heroes, Ernest Hemingway, who also wrote as a journalist on the Spanish Civil War. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* arose out of that experience; I wonder whether Murakami will turn his novelistic skills to a similar end.

One final observation I will make is just how important Murakami's near-native ability in English was to his account. Not many Australians read three daily newspapers cover to cover every morning before they go to work. Murakami's easy grasp of the avalanche of information pouring out of the

Olympic machine, television, newspapers and radio (I should mention that I'm sure that at one point John Laws is the middle-aged Australian speaking on talk-back who he listens to on a taxi radio) made his task easier than has been for other Japanese writers I have read, who compose the occasional essay after visiting Australia full of egregious errors that could have been corrected by reading the daily newspaper.

In general, his generation of Japanese intellectuals has a better command of English than some earlier generations, although not many are as expert as Murakami. This, I think, was a major factor in his construction of Australia — for it is an Australia that I, for one, have no trouble recognising, and in fact find that, for the most part, it is a vision of Australia, with all its flaws and virtues, that I might well embrace.

Footnote

- ¹ All page references are to the edition of *Sydney!* mentioned in the text.