

# The Remains of the Day

## by Kazuo Ishiguro

### The Remains of the Day – In Brief

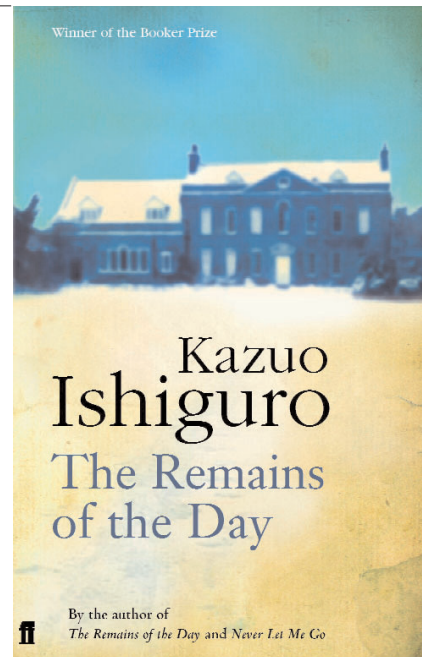
Stevens is a butler at Darlington Hall, a profession of which he is immensely, if quietly, proud. It's the mid-1950s. Britain is not the country it once was: its grand houses no longer peopled by those once presumed to be the great and the good. Stevens finds himself employed by an American and, encouraged by his new employer to take a few days off, sets out to visit Miss Kenton, the ex-housekeeper of Darlington Hall, persuading himself that the nostalgia expressed in her last letter suggests that she may want to return to her former position. As he travels through the English countryside, he recalls the past glories of Darlington Hall, gradually revealing not only his own character but that of Lord Darlington and his misguided attempts to alter the course of history. In prose that is both elegant and poignant, Kazuo Ishiguro captures the attenuated life of a man who has given everything in the pursuit of what he believes to be dignity and must, ultimately, come to terms with disillusionment.

### Background

In each of Ishiguro's first three novels a narrator looks back over their life attempting to come to terms with past mistakes, no matter how obliquely. The publication of his fourth novel, **The Unconsoled**, set in an almost surreal Central European country, marked a radical change in both direction and style. He has said that, having reached the age of 40, he could no longer assume that as one grew older one could look back and see a straight path which had brought one to this point, he 'realised that was not how we experienced life at all. I had the sense when I looked back over my life I would actually see a mess of decisions, a few of which I had thought about, some of which I had sort of stumbled on and many that I had no control over whatsoever.'

Many critics have suggested that **The Remains of the Day** is characterised by nostalgia as Stevens looked back to what he regards as England's golden age. While Ishiguro has agreed that nostalgia is an important element in his work he has said that it is not 'the nostalgia of the imperial past or the comforts that came from a class system that basically depended on the majority of people in Britain being either servants or factory workers . . . rightfully attacked as a nostalgia of a woolly thinking' that interests him but the nostalgia of personal memory. He is a master of the unreliable narrator, and has said that 'As a writer, I'm more interested in what people tell themselves happened rather than what actually happened'.

Ishiguro has described Stevens as springing from 'an international myth about the English butler and English country life that is one that has been fed all around the world', that 'it's that stereotype, the myth that I'm able, then, to tap into and manipulate.' However, the stance of Lord Darlington as at best an appeaser, at worst a Nazi sympathiser, is one that is firmly rooted in reality. Before and throughout the war, some members of the English aristocracy such as Diana Mosley, who became the wife of the National Union of Fascists leader Oswald Mosely, openly consorted with Nazis and with fascist groups, while others such as P. G. Wodehouse, creator of that quintessential butler stereotype, Jeeves, came under suspicion. Such a discomfiting episode in British history is not one that is likely to evoke nostalgia, woolly or otherwise.



## For Discussion . . .

- 'But I must say that this business of bantering is not a duty I feel I can ever discharge with enthusiasm' (page 16). Several times in the novel Stevens finds himself greatly troubled by 'banter'. What part does humour play in the novel and how would you describe that humour?
- What kind of man is Stevens? How would you describe the tone and style of his narrative? Is he a reliable or unreliable narrator?
- We learn a great deal about Stevens as his narrative unfolds. What do his relationships with others tell us about him, in particular his father and Miss Kenton?
- How important is dignity to Stevens? What does he consider it to be and on what foundations is this belief built? How important is an understanding of this belief to understanding Stevens' character? How does his definition compare with Harry Smith's?
- 'Continental are unable to be butlers because they are a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of' (page 44). How has this 'emotional restraint' shaped Stevens' life? It is a trait traditionally associated with the English: how accurate would such a description be today as compared with the 1950s?
- 'It was completely contrary to Lord Darlington's natural tendencies to take such a public stance as he came to do and I can say with conviction that his lordship was persuaded to overcome his more retiring side only through a deep sense of moral duty' (page 64). What did Lord Darlington perceive his 'moral duty' to be? What is Stevens' perception of that 'moral duty' and how does it compare with the reality of Lord Darlington's actions? Why is he so evasive with the ex-batman and with the Wakefields about working for Lord Darlington?
- How important is class in the novel? Stevens is several times taken as a 'gentleman' during his journey. To what class would he describe himself as belonging?
- 'Well, whatever awaits me, Mrs Benn, I know I'm not awaited by emptiness. If only I were. But oh no, there's work, work and more work' (page 249). What would Stevens be without his work? How full is his life?
- Why do you think Ishiguro chose to set Stevens' journey in 1956? How well does Ishiguro capture both the period in which the book is set and the period to which Stevens looks back? What part does nostalgia play in the novel?
- Why do you think Ishiguro chose to call the novel **The Remains of the Day**?
- The book appears to end on an optimistic note. What do you make of the ending?
- **The Remains of the Day** was adapted for a Merchant Ivory film by Ruth Jhabvala. Although Ishiguro has said that he was very happy with the film he describes it as 'a different work from mine'. If you have seen the film how would you compare it to the novel?



### About the Author

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki in 1954. His family moved to Britain in 1960 when his father took up a research post at the National Institute of Oceanography. He read English Literature and Philosophy at the University of Kent, and later graduated from the University of East Anglia with an MA in Creative Writing having studied under Malcolm Bradbury.

He has been writing full-time since 1982. His first novel, **A Pale View of Hills** (1982), won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and his second, **An Artist of the Floating World** (1986), won the Whitbread Book of the Year award as well as being shortlisted for the Booker Prize. **The Remains of the Day**, his third novel, won the Booker Prize in 1989 and was adapted into an award-winning film starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. His fifth and sixth novels – **When We Were Orphans** and **Never Let Me Go** – were both shortlisted for Booker Prize.

In 1995 Ishiguro received an OBE for Services to Literature, and in 1998 was awarded the French honour of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. He lives in London with his wife and daughter.

### Resources

[www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=7561](http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=7561)

Essay on **The Remains of the Day** by Andrew Teverson published at the Literary Encyclopedia

[www.bostonreview.net/BR19.2/stone.html](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR19.2/stone.html)

Review by Alan Stone in the *Boston Review* which compares the film adaptation with the novel

[www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth52](http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth52)

Profile of Kazuo Ishiguro at the British Council website including an essay by Dr James Proctor

[www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/ishiguro.html](http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/ishiguro.html)

Interview by Linda Richards published at *January Magazine* website in 2000 which discusses the filming of **The Remains of the Day**

[www.asiasource.org/news/special\\_reports/ishiguro.cfm](http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/ishiguro.cfm)

Interview by Nermeen Shaikh published at AsiaSource website, which discusses themes in Ishiguro's novels

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,1418284,00.html>

Interview by Tim Adams in the *Observer*, published February 2005

### Suggested Further Reading

**Island Matters** by Tim Binding

**Howard's End** by E. M. Forster

**Atonement** by Ian McEwan

**Brideshead Revisited** by Evelyn Waugh

**Summer Moonshine** by P. G. Wodehouse

#### *Other Books by Kazuo Ishiguro*

**A Pale View of Hills**

**An Artist of the Floating World**

**The Unconsoled**

**When We Were Orphans**

**Never Let Me Go**