



One Great Book: Volume III, Episode 1 *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro

[Show Notes](#)

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One Great Book Volume III, Book 1: *Never Let Me Go*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

Today begins our third volume of *One Great Book*, and for this volume I've chosen books that are absolutely perfect for this time of year. I hope you agree and I hope you find something great for your TBR.

[MUSIC]

"Hard writing makes easy reading." That line is from Wallace Stegner's novel *Crossing to Safety* and it's one of my favorites. To many writers, it's one of the best—and truest—lines in literature; I even worked it into my March 2020 release *Don't Overthink It*. In *Crossing to Safety*, one writer says it to another; they're pros, they know it to be true. And yet readers who enjoy the finished product—the novels so graceful they seem almost effortless—they struggle to believe that the writing process was anything but.

Let me take you behind the scenes to the writing process of one such novel, the kind that reads easy, even if the writing wasn't. The author is Kazuo Ishiguro, whose elegant novels defy easy categorization, and manage to simultaneously feel both restrained and deeply emotional. By the



time he sat down to write what should have been his sixth novel, in the early 1990s, you might imagine that he had his process down. I mean, he'd already won the Booker Prize for *The Remains of the Day*. But when he tried to write this new book about an unusual group of, he called them "students," he couldn't make the story work. After multiple tries, he finally set the idea aside altogether.

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Then years later, an argument on the radio about science and technology triggered a lightbulb moment, and he finally saw how to make the story work. To talk about the real and relevant human concerns he wanted to address, he needed to add something un-real to the story. "The final piece of the jigsaw" he needed was a science fiction element that he then wove into his otherwise entirely realistic tale of three children at a British boarding school. The work first began in 1990; but the result wasn't published until 2005. All that hard writing DID make for easy reading in the end, and it made *Never Let Me Go* One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

Readers now that school has started and school sports especially are in full swing, my drive time and my podcast listening have definitely ticked up. Many of you have told me that One Great Book fits perfectly into your listening habits as a novella-sized, one sitting dose of literary luxury.

But if like me you're and your listening time is growing or you just want a growing to be read list, you should be listening to What Should I Read Next—the podcast that answers the question that plagues every reader. Each week we talk all things books and reading and do a little literary matchmaking with one guest.

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[03:38]

Ishiguro says that his goal is the same for every book he writes: he's always looking to illuminate some aspect of what it means to be human in a way that every reader can relate to. In *Never Let Me Go*, which is both campus novel and coming of age story, he sought to explore the complexities of love, and friendship, and how these things fit into our lives, complementing each other, and sometimes competing with each other—particularly as we come to realize that nothing lasts forever.

In this novel Ishiguro slowly introduces the reader to three teens in an exclusive British boarding school called Hailsham. The story is narrated by Kathy, who introduces herself at the start of the novel as a thirty-one year old carer, who left the school nearly twelve years ago. She tells us, the readers, that she wants to revisit her memories of her two best friends from the school, Tommy and Ruth. “There have been times over the years when I’ve tried to leave Hailsham behind,” she says, “when I’ve told myself I shouldn’t look back so much. But then there came a point where I just stopped resisting.” And so, through Kathy’s eyes, we step back in time, going back to crucial moments in Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth’s school days, days when—though they didn’t know it—they were being prepared for their inescapable future.

[MUSIC]

Because of the dystopian element, the story feels distant to the reader at first: what could you possibly have in common with these British boarding school kids? But as Ishiguro takes you beneath the story’s surface to the emotions that underpin it, he hopes that you will recognize your own story. The power of Ishiguro’s speculative setup is that it allows him—and allows you, the reader—a way to probe the most important things in life in a way that feels real, and importantly, feels urgent. His works often combine elements from different genres, and he is very much okay with these genre mash-ups, believing that by borrowing elements from the fantasy and science fiction genres, he can better get to the core of what it means to be human.



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Ishiguro's prose is compact: he says so much while revealing so little, and while the story's tone appears to be sedate, the reader feels the tension simmering just beneath the surface. This is a story that sneaks up on you: unless one of your fellow readers has cursed you with a spoiler—the reality of what is not-quite-right about these character's lives dawns on you slowly. And then, all at once, you see that the story the character is telling herself—and telling you—is not the story at all.

Readers, this is a book you ideally would go into knowing almost nothing, but many of you have seen too many movie trailers for that to be possible, thanks to the 2010 film adaptation starring Keira Knightley, Carey Mulligan, and Andrew Garfield. If you don't know what I'm talking about, that is wonderful: don't wreck that now by googling. If spoilers have come across your path in the past, I assure you, there's plenty to appreciate in the story even if you won't experience a big reveal.

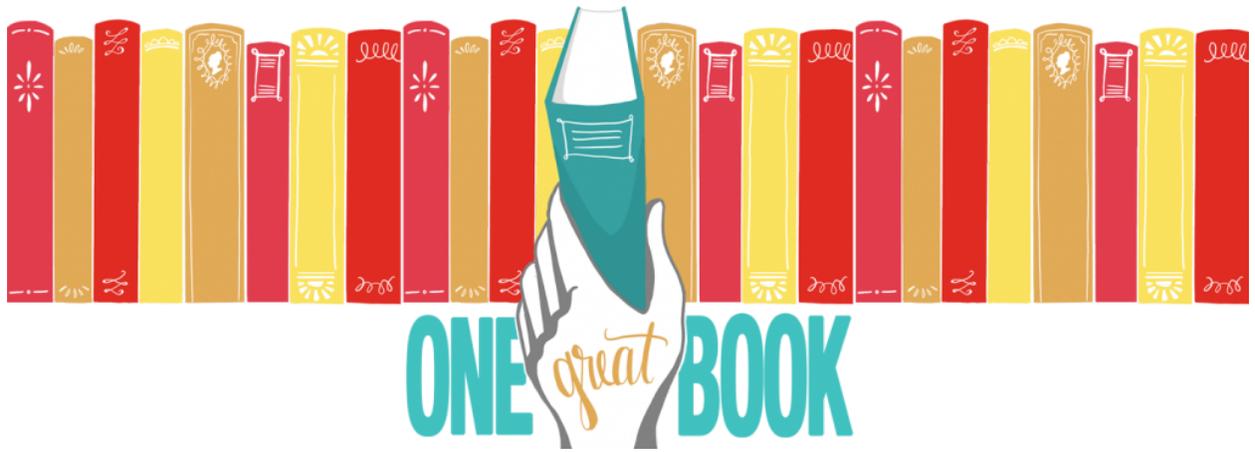
In short, if you're looking for a haunting, atmospheric novel about the power of memory, the relentless passage of time, and the human condition that packs a quiet but sure punch, *Never Let Me Go* may be the next great book you're looking for.

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That's the title of my long form book podcast, where each week a reader tells me three books they love, one book they don't, and what they're reading now, and I recommend three titles they should read next. We've heard time and again from readers that this is the podcast that reinvigorated their reading life.

Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.