

# Murakami Haruki's Wonderland in Russia

Dmitry Kovalenin

*Contemporary Japanese literature is being called "cool" in countries all over the world, and in Moscow and other Russian cities, where the translation business has been slow to get off the ground, the works of Murakami Haruki have produced a booming market. His translator tells us how it all started.*

**M**y first encounter with the writing of Murakami Haruki was in 1993, when I was under contract as a Russian interpreter for the port city of Niigata. By then, I had translated *Sarada kinenbi*, by Tawara Machi, which had not been published, and *Chieko-sho*, by Takamura Kotaro, which was a part of my university research. My background was in literature, so, to be honest, I found my work for the city of Niigata rather boring. In addition, I felt frustrated by the sad fact that for over twenty years, nothing from contemporary Japanese literature had been introduced to Russia.

Feeling the time on my hands awfully *mottainai* (rather a waste), I was desperate to find something more meaningful to do in my life. After all, I had gotten a rare opportunity to live in Japan and to view its culture from the inside.

After work each day, I went to the local Kinokuniya store in Niigata and pawed through the bookshelves for something interesting. But there were too many books for me to get a feeling for what was worth reading. It was very much like Russia or Europe today, where most modern fiction is written solely for people of the country themselves. Most modern Japanese fiction was for the amusement of Japanese only—as if Japan existed on Mars or in a company canteen. And it was not just a problem of translators. Even if the books were translated, a foreign reader would probably be puzzled: What was this book written for? What's the fun of it? I felt a terrible mess in my head thinking what to do.

Once, rather disheartened, I popped down to Hallelujah, a small rock'n'roll bar on Naka-Nishibori Street, where the foreigners in Niigata congregated for their evening beers. The owner of the bar was

a disc jockey by the name of Junji. Junji was a keen man of letters and a real *kokusai-jin* (cosmopolitan). He spoke good English, had traveled abroad a lot, and was open-minded; his opinion was always important to me. So I asked him: Could he recommend a cool Japanese writer who was really good enough to satisfy young people in other countries? He hesitated, long enough to take a Tom Waits record off the turntable and put on a Tim Buckley, then pronounced: Murakami Haruki. And then he lent me a couple of Murakami's novels.

Thanks to Jun-san, I started to read *Hitsuiji o meguru boken*. And immediately, I felt: "This is it!" Let me try to explain why: (1) The book had a story, and the story was astonishing. (2) From the second page, I completely forgot that the author was from Japan. I read the book because I liked it, and because I felt that the hero (*boku*, meaning "me") was somebody who felt very much like me. (3) Still, having finished the book, I understood that no one but a Japanese could have written it. The book was pure Zen, and the feeling of mesmerization while reading it was so amazing, it was as if I had turned into a Japanese man for a while.

*Hitsuiji wo meguru boken* (in English it was translated with the title of *A Wild Sheep Chase*) was so stunning that I started to translate it without any further plan to publish. I did it for my own mental and psychological survival. I had originally come to Japan with my wife, but she did not like living in Japan and soon returned to Vladivostok. Thus, as I translated the Sheep story—at night, alone, in a big, empty snow-covered house—I found myself feeling exactly like *boku* in that haunted mansion in Hokkaido that belonged to Rat's father.

Translating the book took me almost three years. My daytime hours belonged to a Japanese company. I worked on the translation after work, day after day. I finished it in 1996, and at first had no idea what to do with it. I did not have contacts with any publishers in Russia, and as an insignificant salaryman, I could not afford to travel here and there at random to look for a publisher for a Japanese author unknown in Russia.

Then, thank God, the Internet appeared. I bought Windows 95, and with a friend of mine I built the first Russian homepage about contemporary Japanese life and culture. Naturally, a big part of it was dedicated to Murakami. For about two years my compatriots around the world could read Hitsuiji online even while it did not exist on

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paper. For those two years, I received thousands of e-mail messages from Russians of all ages and occupations telling me how great this writer was. "I'm surprised," they exclaimed, "how much his book reminds me of my own feelings hidden deep inside. How could this guy know?!"

It was 1998 when, through the Internet, I finally found a good publisher in St. Petersburg. But that was the time of deep crisis in Russia. The Soviet Union had collapsed, and Russia was suffering under heavy inflation. No one was willing to publish an unknown Japanese writer without a guarantee. The publisher wrote to me: "The Japanese want US\$2,000 for the copyright, plus you must cover the risk of \$5,000 in case we are not able to sell it. Find \$7,000, and we'll talk." Well, I did not have such a sum in my pocket, so I decided to wait for a better times, leaving Murakami in Russian only on my homepage.

One day I received an e-mail message that asked: "Why on earth don't you publish such a good book?" "Because I don't have \$7,000 to spare," I answered. "Okay, then. I'll give you the money. Let's make it happen." "But who are you?" "Well, my name is Gena. I am the owner of two furniture factories in Lithuania. Why should I give money only to the mafia? Sometimes it's good to feed culture, too."

Thus, in the end of 1998, Sheep arrived officially in Russia. Already successfully advertised through the Internet, it made such a huge boom that by now, the end of 2002, it has sold over 100,000 copies in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other big Russian cities. *Dansu dansu dansu* (*Dance Dance Dance*), which I finished in 2001, has sold over 50,000 copies so far. By 2002, inspired by such a success, three of my



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colleagues have produced Russian versions of *Kaze no uta o kike* (*Hear the Wind Sing*), *1973-nen no pinboru* (*Pinball, 1973*), and *Nejimakidori no kuronikaru* (*The Wind-Up Birds Chronicle, 1994*). From 2000 to 2002, one, sometimes two translations of Murakami's novels have been on the official best-selling top ten of all Moscow bookstores. If you search the Russian Internet today for "Murakami Haruki," about eight thousand homepages mentioning that man will flood onto your screen. And this number is only growing. Let's see what will happen in February 2003 when the Russian *Hardboiled Wonderland*, which I am finishing translating right now, hits the bookstores.

After all that, what can I say? Great work, Haruki. Thank you, Junji. Nice move, Gena. When everyone makes cool things, life gets better.

Stay cool, my Japanese friends, and the Russians won't let you down.

## About this Article

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