

Falling under the spell of the West, of a cemetery, of a family of misfits

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Kafka on the Shore

By Haruki Murakami. Alfred A. Knopf. 480 pages. \$25.95.

Kafka on the Shore is a wildly inventive modern epic by Japan's most popular novelist. In his native country Haruki Murakami has millions of fans who treat him more like a rock star than a novelist and eagerly await each new book. This is his 11th, and - like much of his fiction - it offers settings that are both grimly realistic and surreal, a labyrinthine plot, and lovably bizarre characters who can't get enough of life's strangeness.

Though the novel takes place in Japan, the culture that influences Murakami's characters is more Western than Japanese. The 15-year-old hero is named after Franz Kafka, listens to Bob Dylan and the Beach Boys, worries about his Oedipal complex and reads Hemingway. He flees a cruel and tyrannical father and finds a temporary home in a library on a remote Japanese island, which seems to function as a kind of halfway house for cultural refugees who crave the best of the West.

A prostitute quotes Hegel, a cross-dresser praises Yeats and a truck driver named Hoshino develops a fondness for Truffaut films. In Murakami's world almost everyone has fallen under the spell of Western culture, and nobody complains except when it comes to stifling economic and political influences. More of the Beatles and Bogart, please, the characters seem to say, and less of 7-Eleven and Colonel Sanders, who - as a matter of fact - surfaces in this book as a fast-talking pimp.

Just as Kazuo Ishiguro perfectly captures the voice of an English butler in *The Remains of the Day*, Murakami trains his sensitive eye on a life outside his own and transforms and enriches it. By the time you finish reading this novel, you won't be sure whether you've just encountered a great Japanese novelist pretending to be a hip American or a great American novelist pretending to be a disaffected Japanese intellectual.

Rockville Pike

By Susan Coll. Simon & Schuster. 320 pages. \$22.

In *Rockville Pike* Susan Coll demonstrates a wonderful talent for defining the suburban version of *The Way We Live Now*. Everyone knows you're a loser in the suburbs without a car, but Coll expresses this notion in a sentence of devastating bluntness when she describes her heroine's quixotic attempt to cross nine lanes of

traffic: "Only the disenfranchised walked."

The reason middle-aged Jane Kramer braves the highway on foot is that she wants to visit an old graveyard left behind as an isolated pocket of the past in an otherwise thriving commercial strip. Employed at her family's furniture store nearby, she feels overwhelmed by the dreary conformity of the malls and shopping plazas and yearns for something better. Her inspiration lies in the graveyard, which happens to hold the remains of two people - Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald - whose romantic story seems far removed from the throngs shuffling between Crate and Barrel and Pottery Barn.

It doesn't surprise her that no one else sees the point of her dangerous pilgrimages to the cemetery. The only reason her dull husband perks up at the mention of the Fitzgeralds is that a pretty new assistant at the family store suggests developing a line of Zelda and Scott patio furniture. It sounds farcical until you're reminded that there is already a line of Hemingway outdoor furniture on the market.

In this tale of modern Maryland Jane's attempts to change her life are exquisitely comical one moment and deeply sad the next. A magazine cover screams at her, "Are you stuck in the wrong life?" and she screams back, "Yes, I am!" Her various adventures in the Fitzgerald vein - including a crazy trip to New York - don't help much except to bring her back home again, where a local booster asks, "Whither the Pike?" She comes to realize that its destiny includes hers, and that making the most of a "wrong life" is better than endlessly searching for a perfect one.

The lines from *The Great Gatsby* on Scott Fitzgerald's grave ring true for her after all: "And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

The Ha-Ha

By Dave King. Little, Brown. 368 pages. \$23.95.

In Dave King's *The Ha-Ha* the narrator has no problem telling his story to himself and the reader, but in life he can't say a thing. Though Howard can think silently as well as anyone else, he just can't form the words to express those thoughts. It's all the result of a head injury suffered long ago in Vietnam, and in the years since he has been forced to lead a life on the margins of society, doing odd jobs, taking in boarders and communicating with the world through nods and shrugs and raised eyebrows.

Then one day a girlfriend from his pre-war days dumps her 9-year-old son Ryan on him when she goes into drug rehab and can't find anyone else to care for the child. Suddenly, Howard is forced to come out of his protective shell and become an instant father to a difficult boy from a broken home. He gets help from his odd trio of boarders - an independent young Asian-American woman from Texas who sells gourmet soups, and a grungy pair of guys who paint houses occasionally and take life easy the rest of the time.

In a way they make a perfect family of misfits, and Howard is the best one to tell their story, having only his narrative to confide in. Tough but thoughtful and patient, he creates a full life for himself where there was none. He is forced to break old barriers that he had constructed around himself so long ago he forgot they were there.

And this is where the strange title comes in. The ha-ha is the term for the fence hidden from view in a ditch on the grounds of a convent where he mows the lawn. As long as you ride around it, you never have to lay eyes on this fence and can pretend it's not there. With subtlety and grace Dave King neatly employs this image as a controlling metaphor for Howard's tale of inner discovery. One by one, the hidden walls in his life come down and are replaced by emotional connections stronger even than words.

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