

A Shock to the System

Haruki Murakami's stories are set in Japan in the month after Kobe.

AFTER THE QUAKE

Stories.
By Haruki Murakami.
Translated by Jay Rubin.
181 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. \$21.

By Jeff Giles

HARUKI MURAKAMI'S surreal, metaphysical detective novel, "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle" (1997), was a sort of test of his readers' allegiance: when a character spends 50 pages just sitting at the bottom of a well and trying to clear his head, you're either in or you're out. The novel turned out to be the author's most transfixing work, its prose as plain-spoken as ever but its appetites surprisingly epic and dark, particularly for a book about a guy trying to find his cat. Murakami has released three slim novels here in the last few years, if you count the long-delayed American publication of 1987's "Norwegian Wood." All of them were moving in their way. None were entirely nourishing. Given the scope of "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle," the minor-key love stories felt like subplots that had sneaked out of town under cover of darkness and were trying to make a go of it alone.

Murakami's new book, "After the Quake," is unexpectedly powerful, a collection of stories, slender and small as a hand, about the emotional aftershocks of the 1995 earthquake in Kobe. Murakami has said that he considers himself a novelist above and beyond all else, telling his translator and biographer, Jay Rubin, "I think it's important to write short stories, and I enjoy doing so, but I believe strongly that if you take away my novels, there is no me." Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain. Even if "After the Quake" had nothing to say about Murakami, which it certainly does, I'd gladly settle for what it says about us.

Kobe lies in western Japan, a considerable distance from the country's twitchiest fault lines, and was always thought to be fairly safe as far as earthquakes were concerned. But at 5:46 on a Tuesday morning in January, a quake struck nonetheless, causing tens of thousands of old blue and brown tile roofs to fall in, killing more than 4,000 people and leaving nearly 300,000 homeless, including Murakami's parents. It took 20 seconds. I'm laying all this out, like a sixth grader's oral report, because it will be hard for Americans to read "After the Quake" without taking the earthquake as a metaphor for the attack on the World Trade

Center. It's worth remembering that Murakami wrote these stories before Sept. 11, and that he wrote them not because he'd gotten his hands on a nifty literary device but because his homeland had taken a traumatizing shock to the system.

The six stories in "After the Quake" are all set in February 1995, a month after the earthquake and a month before cult members carried out a sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway. Which is to say that Murakami has chosen to freeze in time the moment when Japan was staggering away from the scene of one tragedy and, unknowingly, toward another. (The twin disasters moved the author himself to return to Japan after years of self-imposed exile in the United States and write the nonfiction book "Underground." Rubin investigates

with a chunk of air." What happens next is a classic bit of deadpan Murakami strangeness: Komura agrees to deliver a box for a friend and only after he's passed it along does he think to wonder what was inside. In the end, the mystery drives him close to violence. The box, presumably, is a symbol for Komura himself. Either it contains his soul, and he's just handed it to a stranger — or it's been empty all along.

Murakami has always been drawn to characters who feel empty inside — if you take away my novels, there is no me — and the earthquake has only heightened their sense of dislocation. "Landscape With Flatiron" is a melancholy story about a young woman and a middle-aged painter who apparently abandoned his wife and children in Kobe. The pair make hypnotic bonfires on a



ROB SHEPPERSON

beach, form a bond and trade fears until, one night, the artist says: "I don't know. We could die together. What do you say?" "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo" is a wild story about a six-foot-tall frog who appears in the home of an ordinary bank officer named Mr. Katagiri. The frog tells Katagiri that he needs his aid in the battle against an enormous worm that lives beneath Tokyo and is planning to unleash a crippling earthquake. "Super-Frog" is such an engaging mix of realism and fantasy ("I am a genuine frog. Shall I croak for you?") that it takes a while for you to realize what a sad undertow the story has and how much it says about Katagiri's solitary life, his feelings of powerlessness and his dread of another quake. I mean, unless there really was a six-foot frog. With Murakami, you never know.

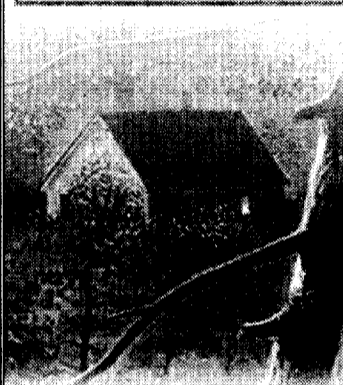
The final story in "After the Quake," "Honey Pie," comes closest to spelling out Murakami's message, which, with apologies to Rilke, is something along the lines of: you must change your life, if you can even call it a life. An agonizingly passive writer named Junpei gets a second chance to marry a woman he's never once stopped thinking about. Astonishingly, he equivocates. Then the earthquake hits: "He hadn't set foot on those streets since his graduation, but still, the sight of the destruction laid bare raw wounds hidden somewhere deep inside him. . . . Junpei felt an entirely new sense of isolation. I have no roots, he thought. I'm not connected to anything." Junpei's attempt to seize the day — and the woman — is fraught and painful and enormously affecting.

Yes, Murakami wrote these stories before Sept. 11. Still, he must know how "After the Quake" will resonate in the United States. The collection was published in Japan as "All God's Children Can Dance," but he changed the title for the English translation. One sliver of what makes the book so moving is the sense that on some level it is Murakami's deeply felt get-well card. □

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