

1Q84 by Haruki Murakami

****out of five

Haruki Murakami's latest novel, "1Q84" - translated from its original Japanese and set in and around Tokyo is a very entertaining, expansive novel rife with rich imagery and symbols. Like many of the best stories it is simple at its heart – unrequited love and the quest to reconnect after years apart - and like many of the best stories it is full of interesting characters, coincidences, chance events and plot twists.

The title is a play on Orwell's novel "1984" – in Murakami's novel the Q stands for "question mark" - and there are many direct and subtle references to his classic, including a group called "the little people", a play on Orwell's Big Brother. Also similar to Orwell's book, "1Q84" is a mix of ordinary, everyday activities and fantastical occurrences. And like contemporary Japan it is also a mix of modern lifestyle, Tradition and culture, and the inevitable intrusion of Western (pop) culture. [In addition to "1984", the song "Paper Moon" is central (interestingly, Orwell had used song lyrics repetitively in his novel, too). "2001: A Space Odyssey", Proust's "In Search of Lost Time", and many other Western works also advance the plot and introduce or reinforce themes].

The combined effect of the plot, themes, imagery, and characters is very entertaining, but readers will find this novel is the very antithesis of a short story. The best short stories are tightly constructed works of art, not an extraneous word, plot digression or loose end; and of course they're short. "1Q84" has so many threads and sub-plots, all apparently building towards the denouement, but unfortunately when the novel finally concludes many of the threads are left hanging. It feels as though Murakami reached a point where he figured he'd written enough and decided to bring the plot to a quick close. Other entertaining novels have done similar – Tom

Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities", for example - and while it doesn't detract from the enjoyment of the journey, it does leave the reader unfulfilled at the end.

Despite this not insignificant failing, Murakami is masterful with his imagery and symbolism. Like Yann Martel's tightly written novella, "Beatrice and Virgil", the book's physical layout emphasized its yin and yang duality: in my edition, the female protagonist, Aomame (an assassin) is pictured on the front, while the male protagonist, Tengo (a ghostwriter), is on the back; the sun and moon imagery is mirrored in the pages before and after the novel; the page numbers and the title are mirrored on even and odd pages, and at almost the exact midpoint in the novel there is a significant shift in the story.

Within the story, the dualities of reality-imaginary, male-female, reproductive-nonreproductive, large-small, urban-natural, light-dark, young-old and other pairings are everywhere - sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit. As an example of the former, the zelkova tree is occasionally mentioned as part of the landscape, a tree common to Japan but one that is also popular as a bonsai; a very subtle reinforcement of the large-small duality.

1Q84 is a wonderful, thoughtful and thought-provoking journey led by a master guide, but unfortunately the destination is a bit disappointing.