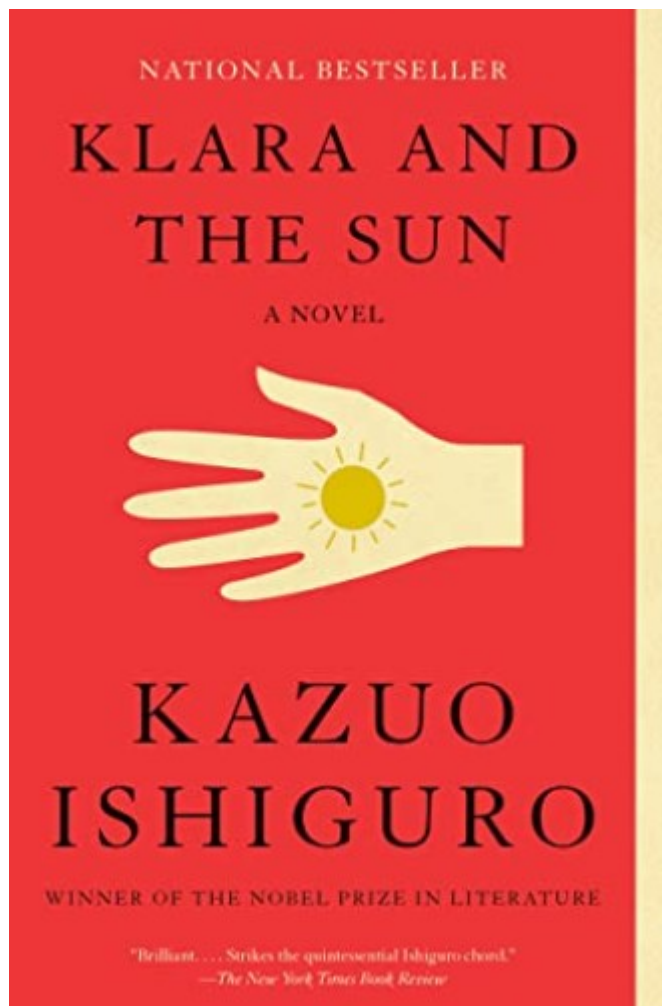


A robot learns to be a child

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by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Klara and the Sun

A Novel

By Kazuo Ishiguro

Knopf

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Walking across a university campus recently, I noticed several small white plastic boxes on wheels. They scurried along sidewalks, crossing streets when traffic cleared, obviously headed somewhere. They were take-out robots, summoned by students on their smartphones to bring tacos or pizza or tandoori chicken to the residence halls. One of them approached me, blinked its lights, and waited for me to pass by. It declined to tell me where it was going.

The central character of Kazuo Ishiguro's virtuosic 2021 novel is a robot of quite another sort. (Think of this year's smartphone compared to a 1970s mobile phone with its bulky battery pack.) Klara is an "Artificial Friend" with a young girl's body, able to act and speak and think for herself. As the novel opens, she is waiting hopefully for someone to choose her from the showroom where she and her AF friends are on display, though she knows she is a generation behind the newest models nearby.

Philosophers and poets have long puzzled over what it is like to experience the world as a dog or a bat or a beetle, but Ishiguro attempts something even riskier and more ambitious. The story that unfolds in *Klara and the Sun* is told from beginning to end from inside the mind of a—what shall we say? Robot? Automaton? Artificial person? Animatronic doll? Each is true in a sense, but none does justice to the richness and complexity of Klara's life.

This is Ishiguro's eighth novel and the first since his 2017 Nobel Prize. It is set in an unidentified major city, where the fabric of urban life is familiar. There are cars and buses, office buildings and parks, center-city apartments and suburban homes. But essential systems are run by computers. Although there are some wilderness refuges, the city air is fouled by emissions from the gigantic industrial devices—"Cootings Machines," Klara calls them—scattered through the streets.

The world of the novel differs profoundly from ours in its approach to childhood, education, and human relationships. Klara exists in a world where all children do their lessons from home on "oblongs," which seem to be small wireless tablets.

Josie, the 14-year-old girl who has chosen her, hosts a mandatory gathering to enhance teenagers' socialization skills, and Klara is not surprised by the bickering and backstabbing that ensue. Whenever Josie, usually a close friend and confidant, coolly sends her away, Klara stands by and waits—for an hour or a few days, until she is needed again. We may recall Stevens, the butler who narrates Ishiguro's most widely read novel, *The Remains of the Day*, always ready to assist his employer, overlooking his moral failings. But this AF seems more self-aware than was the human butler.

Critical parts of the environment emerge elliptically as the story of Josie and Klara unfolds. One of the central concerns in this altered world is the "lifting" of some young children, which seems to be a sort of genetic editing to boost intellectual skills and open the door to high-status professions. Not all families can afford it. Josie has been lifted, but her friend Rick has not, drawing the scorn of Josie's party guests and the worry of her mother, Chrissie.

As it turns out, AFs are not only assistants to children and adolescents but also backup models ready to replace them if necessary. That is part of Josie and Klara's relationship, and it's the reason for Chrissie's obsessive insistence that Klara "learn" her daughter. An expert on such matters tells Klara that she can "learn Josie. Not just superficially, but deeply, entirely. Learn her till there's no difference between the first Josie and the second." But can an AF really "continue" a child, Chrissie wonders? The expert reassures her:

The trouble is, Chrissie, you're like me. We're both of us sentimental. We can't help it. Our generation still carry the old feelings. A part of us refuses to let go. The part that wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something that's unique and won't transfer. But there's nothing like that, we know that now. . . . The second Josie won't be a copy. She'll be the exact same and you'll have every right to love her just as you love Josie now. It's not faith you need. Only rationality.

The inner self, the heart, the soul—all these are relics of a prescientific mentality.

However, Josie's father has his doubts. He asks Klara, "Do you believe in the human heart?" Could Klara learn not just Josie's thoughts and habits but also "what's deeply inside her?" Klara replies thoughtfully:

The heart you speak of . . . might indeed be the hardest part of Josie to learn. It might be like a house with many rooms. Even so, a devoted AF, given time, could walk through each of those rooms, studying them carefully in turn, until they become like her own home. . . . If this were the best way to save Josie, then I'd do my utmost. And I believe there's a good chance I'd be able to succeed.

The themes and narrator of *Klara and the Sun* recall Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*. That story begins as an English boarding school memoir, but the school is oddly isolated, its students closely monitored. The narrator, Kathy, looking back decades later, leaves bread crumbs along a trail that leads to the dystopian tale's macabre premise: the problem of organ shortages has been solved by breeding human clones to provide them. The boarding school is a short-lived philanthropic experiment in enriching the short lives of future donors. Kathy and Klara, two not-quite-human narrators with five-letter names beginning with K, bring to mind a 20th-century writer of nightmarish metaphysical fables: both of these novels have Kafkaesque elements.

But while the mood of the earlier book is dark and chilling, *Klara and the Sun* is brighter and warmer in tone. We are drawn to its odd storyteller, admiring both her relentless cheerfulness and her capacity to think outside the circuit board. Her answers to questions about meaning and identity are far more illuminating than, say, Siri's or Alexa's. There are, however, loose ends and unanswered questions, such as what the Cootings Machine does. Perhaps that's because Klara cannot fully explain everything.

At age five, Ishiguro moved from Japan to a town near London where his father was a civil service oceanographer. Interviewer Giles Harvey wrote in the *New York Times* last year that the adolescent Ishiguro aspired to be a singer-songwriter. "He and his friends would sit around for hours nodding along to [Bob] Dylan's obscure lyrics as though they understood every word. . . . From Dylan, as well as Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell, he learned about the possibilities of the first-person: how a character could be summoned into being with just a few words."

Klara's mode of speech, nothing like Dylan's, is formal and precise. On an outing to see a waterfall she notes that "because it was my first time inside a car, I couldn't make a good estimate of our speed. It seemed to me the Mother drove unusually

fast.” At times her account evokes the uninterpreted sense-data that analytic philosophers such as A. J. Ayer and G. E. Moore posit as the foundation of empirical experience. Indeed, Klara’s visual world—for reasons never made clear—sometimes devolves into a matrix of boxes, then reunifies.

As he imagined Klara’s inner life, perhaps Ishiguro drew insight about consciousness and the self not just from folk songs but from philosophers who share his perplexity. He doesn’t say. Here and in other works I have read, he engages profound theological questions while avoiding any appeal to religious language or tradition.

There are, however, supernatural elements in Klara’s world, which she regards as a Manichaeian battleground between the Sun and Pollution. When Josie falls ill, Klara finds her way to the barn where the Sun appears to her to set each day and pleads: “Please make Josie better” because “Josie’s still a child and she’s done nothing unkind.” Then, like Job and Elijah, Klara proposes a bargain: “I know how much the Sun dislikes Pollution. How much it saddens and angers you. Well, I’ve seen and identified the machine that creates it. Supposing I were able somehow to find this machine and destroy it. To put an end to its Pollution. Would you then consider, in return, giving your special help to Josie?”

Klara later returns to the sacred site and offers a prayer so long that any listening congregation would get antsy. She has destroyed a Cootings Machine, but Josie’s condition is worse. Now she pleads:

I know I’ve no right to come here like this. And I know the Sun must be angry with me. I let him down, failing completely to stop Pollution. . . . I sincerely apologize for underestimating my task. It was my error and no one else’s, and though the Sun is right to be angry with me, I’m asking he accept that Josie herself is completely innocent. . . . I’ve never forgotten how kind the Sun can be. If only he would show his great compassion to Josie.

Is Klara speaking here for all of us, recognizing how little we have done to stem the evil we have put in motion—forces of technical wizardry uprooting community, fantasies of machines to take our place, selves who appeal to rationality to deny their selfhood?

In a probing essay on this and other recent works by Ishiguro, James Wood wrote last year in the *New Yorker*: “Theology is, in some guises, just the metaphysics of favoritism: a prayer is a postcard asking for a favor, sent upward. Whether our postcards are read by anyone has become the searching doubt of Ishiguro’s recent novels, in which this master, so utterly unlike his peers, goes about creating his ordinary, strange, godless allegories.”

Klara’s faith in the Sun is, finally, rewarded. In the novel’s closing pages, Klara finds comfort in a place that readers might not expect. With her, and with the author, we draw back just a bit from the brink of utter meaninglessness.