

Haruki Murakami's Lessons on Writing and Leading a Writer's Life

What I learned from reading his "autobiography" reflecting on his life as a writer

[N.A. Turner](#)

You have 2 free member-only stories left this month.

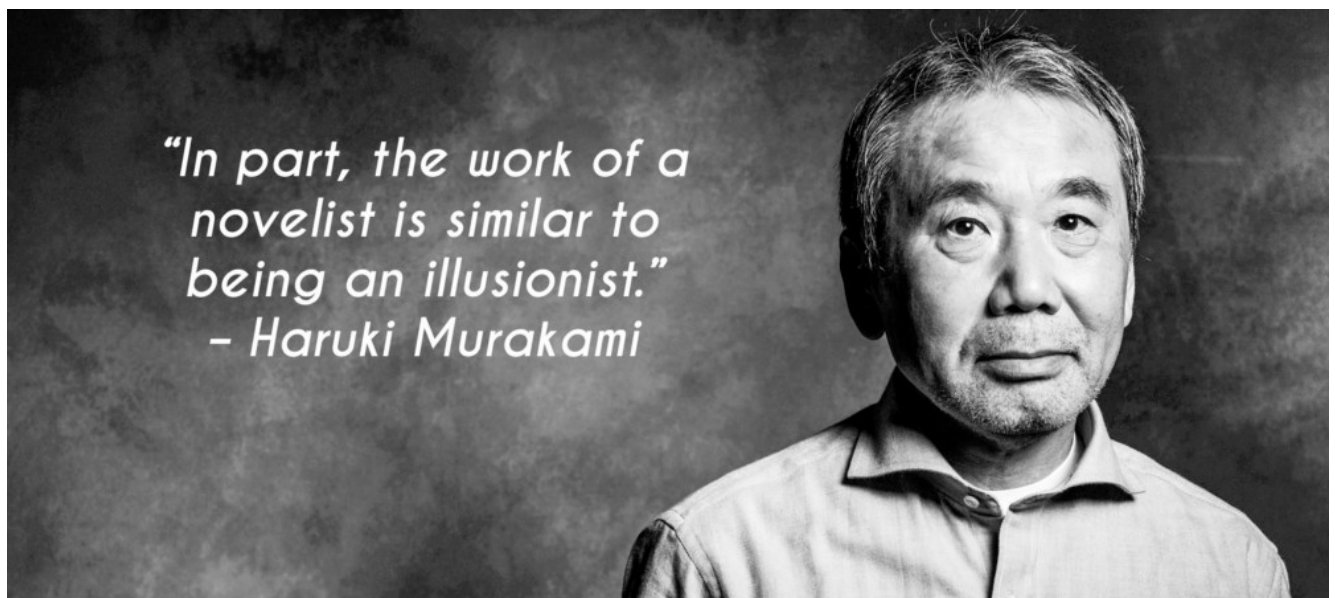


Photo credit: Mail Today

"The world seems dull, but in fact, it's filled with magical and mysterious rough gemstones. The novelist is equipped with the eyes to discover

them.” — Haruki Murakami

Whenever I talk books with friends and the name Haruki Murakami is mentioned people are on edge. Murakami is the kind of writer people either love (to an obsession) or just don't get.

I belong to the first category. I loved last year's '[Killing Commendatore](#)'. [1Q84](#) is also one of my favorites.

Luckily, there are still many of his books I haven't read yet, so I'm in for more treats.

Murakami is notorious for shying away from the media and he rarely does any interviews. He just likes to focus on his writing and has a very stoic attitude when it comes to all the 'fluff' that comes with being a well-known writer. Except for his fans, he explains that there was a time that he personally responded to all fan mail. Wow.

I was pleasantly surprised a couple of weeks ago when I learned that a new book was coming out. Not a novel, but an "*autobiography*" about writing. As far as I am aware, this book hasn't been translated into English yet. I read it in Dutch. Apparently, it was published in 2015 in Japanese.

It's basically a collection of essays he's revisited and expanded. And it's packed with writing wisdom. Not only about the craft, but also about what it means to him to be a writer.

In this article, I'll try to capture the wisdom of this interesting, productive and intriguing writer behind successes such as [Norwegian Wood](#) and 1Q84.

[Note: I've translated all the quotes from the book from Dutch to English. The book is published in Dutch with Atlas Contact.]

How Haruki Murakami Became a Novelist

Murakami has the most unusual origin story as to why he became a writer. He had an epiphany when watching a baseball match: he needed to write a novel. Before, he never even thought about writing.

"[Writing] apparently filled a void I was feeling in my heart, just before I turned thirty." — Haruki Murakami

He didn't study writing — it just happened. What he did do, however, was read. A lot. From a very young age, Murakami's mind was always somewhere else, immersed in fictional worlds. **He considers reading as the most important prerequisite if you want to become a writer.**

He owned a bar in his basement in Tokyo and later a Jazz bar in another neighborhood. When he closed the bar, he wrote his first novel at his kitchen table. This particular novel ([Hear the Wind Sing](#)) happened to win a literary prize which launched him into writer-hood. Reflecting

upon this in the book, he states that luck and timing were very important when it comes to his career.

Reading his book, you can settle yourself into the mind of a — in my opinion — brilliant author, who reflects on his success, writing habits and lifestyle with humility and passion. Hopefully, it'll be translated into English soon.

#1: On Learning the Craft

"Imagination is memory." — James Joyce

As some of you know, I like to dive into author's tips, habits, and assumptions about writing. Every author I've studied agrees at least on one thing: when you want to be a writer you have to read a lot. You have to understand how a novel is composed.

In the book, Murakami argues that an (aspiring) writer must adopt the following habits if he or she wants to become an author:

- A writer must experience a lot
- The habit of detailed observation, whatever the experience
- Use a notebook to write down your ideas and observations. Murakami, however, uses his mind.

"This way, what must disappear, disappears and

what should stay, stays.” He calls it a form of natural selection.

- Thoroughly collect and store the materials you need for your story

*“You don’t have to go to the Faculty of Literature at University to become a novelist. Because specialized knowledge to write a novel is virtually non-existent.”
— Haruki Murakami*

#2: On Finding Your Style

“You must use the language you’re most capable in to your advantage, turn it into a weapon and describe the things which appear to you most clearly, using the words that suit you best.” — Haruki Murakami

When Murakami started his writing, he disliked his Japanese prose and felt something was off. He then decided to write in English, but he was far from fluent. Now he had to use only the words at his disposal to express what he wanted, he found this a very efficient method. This is how his style and rhythm was created.

He realized he didn’t need to use difficult words or styles

to say what he wanted to say. I couldn't agree more with his findings. Recently, I've [published an article about how you can optimize your writing toolbox](#). Language, grammar, and style are a part of that toolbox.

Use the words that you know and tell a story the way you would tell yourself or a friend. Especially when writing a first draft, don't stress about your vocabulary or grammar. You can polish later.

Haruki Murakami is a type of writer who writes for himself first, **"you can't please everyone, so better please yourself."** This is true for me as well. And as long as I am enjoying it, I continue. Besides, if I enjoy it, there's a reason to believe that there might be others out there who might do too.

#3: On Creating Habits and Routines Around a Writing Life

Murakami comes across as a very disciplined man. Day in day out, he goes to bed early and he rises early. His evenings are quiet. Early in the morning he makes himself a cup of coffee and spends about 4–5 hours on writing. Then, he goes out for a run.

He strives to write 10 pages every day — mind you, this is in Japanese signs. This comes down to 2,5 pages in Word, about 1,200 words.

I'm fairly disciplined but my routine is nowhere near as exact as his. Granted, I'm not a full-time writer, I have a job (still, [but I'm about to dive into another adventure](#)). The only thing I'm able to do daily is to write 800–1,200 words in the morning.

Setting and achieving this daily word goal will make you super productive. This way, you can finish the first draft of a novel in about six months. [Stephen King](#) does it as well!

Exercise is crucial to Murakami. When writing, he needs to think for a long time and focus, his brain gets overheated, exercise is what helps to relieve this and prepare him for the next day. Apparently, physical strength leads to mental strength for him.

I could do better on this. I know and feel that whenever I exercise, my mind is much clearer and I feel stronger. I just need to get my lazy ass up from behind my laptop. So I do yoga, run or exercise on my rebounder while watching Netflix (no joke!).

#4: On Originality and Creativity

“Every act of perception, is to some degree an act of creation, and every act of memory is to some degree an

act of imagination.” — Oliver Sacks

Murakami's chapter on originality is fascinating and dense. To be considered original, an artist must meet the following criteria according to Murakami:

- Have their own unique style which separates him or her from the rest
- Be able to develop that style and polish it through the years
- Then his or her style can become a standard over time

The thing is though, often when a writer introduces something out of the ordinary, he or she will often not be taken seriously. Think of it this way: Hemingway was mocked because of his style in his days, but now his style has become a norm.

When people call his works original, Murakami feels that if this really is the case, it's due to the fact that his work has originated from a sense of freedom to create.

*“In part, the work of a novelist is similar to being an illusionist.” —
Haruki Murakami*

Murakami believes that the most important thing in creating something is that you feel joyous doing it. I

couldn't agree more. Whenever I'm working on a short story or when I'm writing on my novel, I forget the time. I enter some sort of coveted "flow state" which allows me to completely dive into my own created worlds, interacting with my characters. For someone who considers himself mostly an introvert, this is heaven.

#5: On Writer's Block and Coming Up With Ideas

"I've never experienced writing to be a burden. Luckily, I've never experienced the torment of not being able to get anything down on paper." — Haruki Murakami

Murakami states that he's lucky. He almost never has deadlines, therefore he experiences no writer's block. What he means by this, is that he is free to create whatever he wants without pressure.

He creates from a sense of freedom and alternates between writing a novel or writing essays. Murakami writes because he can't hold in much longer what he wants to say. These two things are key to keeping the flow in your writing.

I do this too. I create whatever I want because I have no one's deadlines to meet. I'm writing a novel, short stories and blogs posts like these. This freedom and the fact that I alternate, keep the juices flowing. And if you still feel stuck, [you can always come up with more ideas](#).

It helps though, to focus on one thing at a time and use the bandwidth of your imagination wisely.

"Before a man becomes an artist, the novelist must become a free man. To do what you want, when and how you want it, to me is the definition of a free man."
— Haruki Murakami

#6: On Creating Characters

"One of the greatest aspects of fiction writing to me is that I can become whoever I want to be." —
Haruki Murakami

Although the following sounds obvious, it's always good to be reminded of it by a well-known author. In order to create characters, you have to get to know many people in order to describe people. That, and again, you have to read a lot, according to Murakami.

Fun fact: In his first few novels he didn't like to name his

characters. He found it embarrassing to give character names early on in his career, he felt like a fraud. I had a similar experience, with my first couple of short stories I didn't name my characters either. I got away with it on the first one '[The Money Tree](#)', but after that one, multiple people who provided me with feedback urged me to name my characters.

One last piece of advice from the Japanese wordsmith I wanted to share: *"Conflict between characters creates progress in a story."*

#7: On Editing

Murakami is, like I said, an intriguing writer. He loves creating, but he equally loves editing. When his first drafts are finished, he takes a short break before the editing work begins. Then, he does a thorough rewrite from start to finish.

He does 4–5 complete rewrites, removing inconsistencies, polishing his prose, and creating a better rhythm. Then he leaves the manuscript for about a month and does one more rewrite before he lets his wife have the first read. Her opinion is very important to him.

He hates criticism on his work, but pieces that are up for discussion and need improvement according to his wife, he improves. Then the duel starts with his editor. He's really defensive about his writing and explains that he

needs to cool off for a while when he receives his feedback. When he cools off he gets to work and improves the manuscript once more.

Fun fact: because he's a discovery writer, he usually produces too much. It happened with [The Wind-up Bird Chronicle](#), he cut out a couple of chapters which he turned into a completely new book (South of the Border).

Bonus: On writing short stories

*"A short story is a nimble, moving vehicle, suited to address particular things I can't catch in a novel." —
Haruki Murakami*

Since I love writing [short stories](#) and I'm posting articles to [help you write short stories](#) as well, I couldn't leave out his thoughts on short story writing.

Murakami describes short stories as a great exercise for his mind. He usually refers to the short story craft because it allows him to experiment both in his style as with his narrative.

Conclusion

I hope that this "autobiography" becomes available in

English soon. For now, I hope you enjoyed a glimpse of his thoughts on writing. I for one was completely mesmerized by his insights on the craft.

To striving to become better! Thanks for reading.

Want to know more about Murakami? I recommend checking out [his US website](#), it's got a lot of fun links and "behind the scenes".

[Join my email list to keep in touch.](#)