



*On Haruki Murakami's  
A Wild Sheep Chase,  
or How I Got 'Sheeped'  
by Peter Rock*

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Selected by Fiona Maazel, author of *Last Last Chance*.

*Read a great novel and, indeed, you are transformed. Sad, happy, sheeped. Read a paean to a great novel, and it's like watching kids laugh at the zoo; they are happy, exalted, moved, and just for watching them, you grow inside. Love in the arts is a relay, from one enthusiast to the next, and here is Peter Rock, spreading the good word. I have not read much Murakami—just enough to know I should read more—but this is hardly the point. I read this little homage on break from writing a novel of my own—this novel has me drowned in heartwreck—and I am shored. Sad, happy, shored. – FM.*

The first time I encountered Haruki Murakami I was working on a ranch outside of Livingston, Montana, where I lived in a small house I'd rented with my girlfriend. This was 1991; we were just out of college, both writers (though I worked with cattle and

sheep and she served as the “Spuds Mackenzie Party Girl” at the local bowling alley). On the days I didn’t go to the ranch, I stayed home and wrote. I was working on a very important novel, one that had fifty chapters of ten pages each and would be exactly five hundred pages long (I completed this, a disaster). I’d walk around the house looking at the bookcases—we’d mixed up our books, a big step, and there amid my Hemingway was a large, hardcover book. *A Wild Sheep Chase*. I read the title on its spine many, many times before I deigned to take it off the shelf. The cover had a sheep on it, a drawing of one, a star on its ass; but it was the back cover that I found more infuriating. There, a seemingly mild-mannered Japanese man stood holding a cat. I had a hard time taking him seriously, as he did not appear to be especially fierce. Writers I admired had dogs, and glared into the middle distance. Besides, I worked with sheep every day—what did a kitten-wielding Japanese man have to teach me?

Seven years later, my books had long been sifted from those of my ex-girlfriend, *A Wild Sheep Chase* still unread, straying all the way to Toronto while I returned to Utah, to San Francisco. In this time I had read Kawabata’s amazing *Palm of the Hand Stories*, along with Mishima, and Tanizaki; I had begun to wonder who might have followed these masters when I came upon a story by Murakami called “New York Mining Disaster.” The ferocity of the sensibility, the curiosity and simplicity and depth—it was all there. That day I found a copy of *A Wild Sheep Chase* and began my glorious penance. Now it’s almost fifteen years since I first picked up that novel, back in the cold days of Livingston, Montana. I have found a friend in this writing that reminds me not only why I myself write, but why I live.

Murakami is obsessive, repetitious, and I revel in rather than grow irritated by the similarity of his narratives. I expect the lost girl or cat, the dry well, all that underground action, spaghetti cooking, sex that comes from strange directions, as an emotional kind of friendship. It's the mysteries between people that he suggests so well, that he demonstrates with stories that are a mixture of detective fiction and speculation and yearning; this is a literature of curious heart, not pretension. Not showy prose (in an interview, he said he strove to have no real style, as that would be distracting; my Japanese mother-in-law, reading his prose in the original, was quite unimpressed), but trust in his story. The shapes of his narratives arise from within, so organically that it makes me wonder at the very nature of fiction.

In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the reader starts into a humorous detective novel, veers into a seemingly alternate world, full of humor and surprise, and soon there is no turning back. A character in the book is so transformed that he is said to have been 'sheeped'; in a sense, this is what happened to me. This is what happens to the reader of Murakami. Our DNA is slightly shifted, recombined. Our world is not the same, either.

Is *A Wild Sheep Chase* Murakami's best book? I don't know; it's a good place to start, and I tell you this because it's where I started. If you seek something slightly more realistic, you can go with *Norwegian Wood* or *South of the Border, West of the Sun*; *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is a combination, in a sense, of all of Murakami's styles and themes, and it's a commitment that pays off in several directions. Anywhere you turn, you will not be disappointed—to the astounding non-fiction chronicle of the Sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway, *Underground*, to his most recent novel, *Kafka on the Shore*,

which will allow you a glimpse of heaven, talking cats, Colonel Sanders and Johnny Walker as full-blown people, and a subtle demonstration of how a chance meeting can become a haunting friendship. Often I believe that Murakami's short stories are where he is fiercest, most unpredictable and bold; great ones like "The Last Lawn of the Afternoon" or "Barn Burning" from *The Elephant Vanishes*; "Honey Pie" or "Landscape with Flatiron" from *After the Quake*. His next collection of stories will contain some of the best, certainly the most startling stories I've ever read.

"I explain very carefully and clearly," Murakami said in an interview, describing his work, yet what he has to explain is so mysterious that a careful explanation of what surrounds it is as close as we can get to apprehension. There is no better combination of respect and delight. What did this kitten-wielding Japanese man have to teach me? Everything, it turns out. As I struggle with my own tangled words, as I challenge myself toward a frontier, I reach out for his work, for him. This writing gives me heart.

Peter Rock was born in Salt Lake City, and now lives in Portland, Oregon. He's the author of four novels, most recently *The Bewildered*, and a collection of short stories, *The Unsettling*.