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2013 Helmerich Award winner Kazuo Ishiguro says songwriting came first

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Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese-born British novelist and Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award winner, signs copies of his books during an event at Hardesty Regional Library in Tulsa on Saturday. JAMES GIBBARD / Tulsa World

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By DAVID HARPER World Staff Writer



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Kazuo Ishiguro broke the mold.

The Tulsa Library Trust's 2013 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award winner did not follow a typical path to literary success. Instead of starting out as a voracious reader who overcame a stack of rejection letters to become a well-known author, Ishiguro took a decidedly different route.

Ishiguro told those who gathered Saturday morning at Tulsa's Hardesty Regional Library that while he enjoyed Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books as a youngster growing up in England, he was more interested in watching the exploits of the Lone Ranger and listening to the music of Bob Dylan.

During the Saturday public address that is a traditional part of the Helmerich Award festivities, Ishiguro said his initial writing efforts as a young man were in the field of music.

Ishiguro said songwriting showed him "you can use words in a very disciplined way."

He said that while the songs he wrote as a young man were confessional and drew on his experiences, he later learned the value as an author of creating characters very different from him to propel his stories.

"It helps me focus on what I really want to write about, and that autobiographical baggage doesn't start to seep in," he said.

Ishiguro is best known for writing "The Remains of the Day," a poignant story of a butler who lets his chance at love slip away. On Saturday, he referred to it as a tale of a "wasted life in terms of emotions." The book made Ishiguro a literary star and was also adapted into a critically acclaimed movie starring Sir Anthony Hopkins.

He said Saturday that he was "genuinely pleased" with how that movie turned out and also with the film version of "Never Let Me Go," another one of his works.

Still, he said the healthiest attitude that any author whose book is to be turned into a movie can have is to hope that a good movie with the same title as the book happens to be made.

"It's a different group of artists making it into a different work of art that has to work in that medium," Ishiguro said of the process of others turning a book into a movie.

Despite that process, he said literature and film actually form an important cultural alliance in a world in which bookstores and record stores are increasingly difficult to find.

Ishiguro said he began writing short stories in his early 20s and never received a rejection letter regarding his work.

His first two novels, "A Pale View of the Hills" and "An Artist of the Floating World," featured Japan, the country where he was born but moved away from when he was a child.

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He said he had not been interested in his Japanese heritage until he was in his 20s, when he sensed that his childhood memories of his native land were fading and felt the need to preserve them.

Memories and dreams are important underpinnings of Ishiguro's work. He said writing a novel allows an author to take readers through time more effectively than flashbacks usually do in movies.

Ishiguro said Saturday, "really interesting work is stylized. It isn't just a mirror of everyday life."

He said he used dreamlike imagery in his novel "The Unconsoled." He described that book as his least successful commercially, but he indicated that it seems to have a devoted following wherever he goes.

A longtime British citizen, Ishiguro said his visit to Tulsa to receive the Helmerich Award allowed him to see "the real, true heartland of America. It's always how I imagined America to be."

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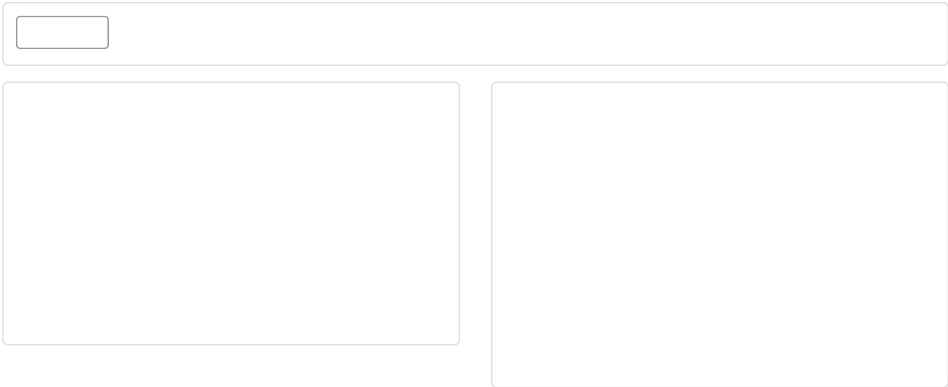
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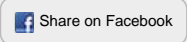
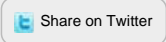


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By Tom Ichniowski
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By Tom Ichniowski
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