

Catfish, Super Frog, and the End of the World

Earthquakes (and natural disasters) in the Japanese Cultural Imagination

By Alex Bates



Figure 1. "The Kashima Deity Subduing the Namazu" (*Namazu wo osaeru Kashima dai myojin*). From Miyata Noboru and Takada Mamoru, *Namazu-e: Shinsai to Nihon Bunka* (Ribun Shuppan, 1995) 5, print number 35.

One of the earliest written records of Japan, the *Nihon shoki* or *Chronicles of Japan*, includes a poem about an earthquake written during the reign of Emperor Buretsu (about 500 CE).¹ The poem is not particularly memorable, but this early reference to earthquakes through a creative medium is the beginning of a long history of disasters represented within the cultural imagination. To take a more recent example, the eighties era sci-fi anime series *Bubblegum Crisis* is set in a post-apocalyptic landscape shaped not by nuclear war or some other human intervention, but by an earthquake. A few years ago, I taught a class covering representations of disaster in Japanese literature, art, and film. In this article, I draw on that experience to trace the connections and divergences among cultural interpretations of natural disasters, primarily earthquakes, through time. These representations of catastrophe provide unique insight into both the calamities themselves and the historical eras in which they occur. The examples I focus on—from a Buddhist monk's philosophical exploration of the end of the world to a postmodern writer's look at an earthquake after the collapse of the bubble economy—show a range of responses that each link the disaster to its particular social and political context.

The essay "The Ten Foot Square Hut" ("Hōjōki"), written by the poet-priest Kamo no Chōmei in the early thirteenth century, is particularly accessible to students because they recognize Chōmei's appreciation of nature and his desire for a simple life mirrored by people like Thoreau. But to see "The Ten Foot Square Hut" as only a manifestation of a universal concept is to miss the specific historical and philosophical undertones, both of which are closely connected to the disasters Chōmei mentions in the text.

Although "The Ten Foot Square Hut" was written in 1212, most of the events Chōmei describes specifically occur between 1175 and 1185. During this decade and the years leading up to it, the court culture of *The Tale of Genji* was crumbling. Taira Kiyomori, a warrior from the east, had taken control, and by 1181, his enemies were driving his clan from power in the civil wars immortalized in *The Tale of the Heike*. At the same time, several natural disasters rocked the capital, as if the natural world was mirroring the political confusion, giving credence to the Buddhist idea that the world was in its final chaotic stage. In this work, Chōmei focuses on the natural disasters to highlight ideas about the "end of the world" (*mappō*) and the impermanence of the phenomenal world (*mujō*).

The catfish image is derived from a myth that explains the origins of earthquakes as the movement of a giant catfish or *namazu* living underground.

The central idea behind mappō was that, as time passed from the Buddha's existence on earth, his law would be corrupted until finally, all order would collapse and people would be unable to attain enlightenment.² In the essay, disasters are portrayed as symptomatic of the time and particularly as an example of the Buddhist concept of mujō, or impermanence. This relationship between natural disaster and mujō is clear in the dominant metaphor of the essay, that of houses—which through their destruction underscore the impermanence of all things. The famous opening sets the stage for the ensuing discussion.

*The river flows on unceasingly, but the water is never the same water as before. Bubbles that bob on the surfaces of the still places disappear one moment to reappear again the next, but they seldom endure for long. And so it is with the people of this world and with the houses they live in.*³

Chōmei uses the river as an analogy for this world and its instability: nothing we see as permanent actually is so. This assertion is repeated in the various disasters that befell Heiankyō in rapid succession: the great fire of 1177, a typhoon that struck in 1180, Taira no Kiyomori's directive to move the capital,⁴ a two-year famine, and finally, an earthquake in 1185. Though the city and humanity seem permanent, houses are constantly destroyed and rebuilt, fortunes are reversed, and even the earth itself shifts like the water in the river.

The disasters of Chōmei's time served as reminders that the world was at its end and that impermanence was the only constant. The Buddhist solution to living in a shifting world is to renounce attachment to that world. Chōmei became a recluse, forgoing his mansion for a hut. Yet at the end of his essay, Chōmei realizes that even his attachment to his small hut and his simple life impedes his progress toward enlightenment in the age of mappō.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

"The Ten Foot Square Hut" would enrich discussions of the turbulent twelfth century in Japan, religion, and disaster or disasters in literature. There is also some resonance with Boccaccio's *Decameron*, set during a plague in 1348. The young protagonists leave the world of plague-stricken Florence, but their reclusion is full of distracting stories, many illustrating reversal of fortune. Though the tales in the book itself are often lighthearted, the prologue sets the scene in gruesome detail, and the dark shadow of the plague lingers behind the text. Like "The Ten Foot Square Hut," Boccaccio's introduction highlights the impermanence of wealth through the metaphor of empty houses.

*Ah, how great a number of splendid palaces, fine houses, and noble dwellings, once filled with retainers, with lords and with ladies, were bereft of all who lived there, down to the tiniest child! . . . How many gallant gentlemen, fair ladies, and sprightly youths . . . having breakfasted in the morning with their kinsfolk, acquaintances and friends, supped that same evening with their ancestors in the next world.*⁵



Figure 2. Blocking the Shin-Yoshiwara Giant Namazu (*Shin-Yoshiwara dai namazu yurai*). Miyata and Takeda, 14–15, print number 46.

Like the disasters Chōmei describes in “The Ten Foot Square Hut,” the Ansei Earthquake of 1855 came at a time already seen as unstable. The power of the Tokugawa shōgunate was seen to be waning, and, importantly, the earthquake came on the heels of Commodore Perry’s visits to Japan in 1853 and 1854.⁶ The contemporary political unease, coupled with the fact that the destruction was centered in the capital, helped this particular earthquake capture the popular imagination. This is manifest in the large number of catfish images, called *namazu-e*. The catfish image is derived from a myth that explains the origins of earthquakes as the movement of a giant catfish, or *namazu* living underground. According to legend, this catfish was normally held by a stone and guarded by the Kashima deity. If the deity was absent or lax in his attention, the catfish would escape and wreak havoc.⁷ The belief in *namazu* as a cause of earthquakes was directly manifested in *namazu-e* that illustrates the legend (Fig. 1 on page 13). These prints were often used as charms to ward off future disaster.

Although charms depicting *namazu* show that some faith in their efficacy remained, the flexibility and creativity of the catfish trope in other images go beyond folk belief. Rather, catfish became an embodiment of the power of the earthquake and the role it performed in contemporary society. In some prints, such as the image on the left, the catfish is a scapegoat, punished in revenge for the chaos and destruction it caused (Fig. 2). In others, the catfish brings about a welcome change in the order of things. In the image on the right, the catfish is shaking the wealth from merchants who had been hoarding it into the welcome hands of craftsmen, whose labor was in demand following the disaster (Fig. 3). In fact, in Figure 2, we can see the craftsmen who benefited from the disaster (top left) running to save the *namazu* from those who are beating it.

Unlike the Buddhist philosophy underpinning “The Ten Foot Square Hut,” *namazu-e* are frequently about more down-to-earth reversals of fortunes. These often-humorous images show the frustration of being hurt by fate, as well as the delight of benefiting from forced redistribution of wealth. At least in the latter case, the catfish represent one aspect of the *yonaoshi* (or social improvement) rhetoric of the era. Many people understood that the times were dark and the need for change was palpable. More often than not, popular resentment was directed at the wealthy, and the *yonaoshi* rhetoric resulted in peasant uprisings that continued into the *Meiji* era. In these *namazu-e*, the earthquake, represented by the catfish, is not only a reflection of the unstable state of society, but an agent actively involved in improving it.

The Ansei earthquake and the mappō disasters of “The Ten Foot Square Hut” happened during times of political unease, but the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 came in an era of stability and prosperity. In one fell swoop, the capital was crippled, and over one hundred thousand people died, making it the deadliest earthquake in Japanese history. In the immediate aftermath, the people found a more visible scapegoat for the quake than the catfish—resident Koreans. This is a dark example of the way imagination can give meaning to an earthquake. The imagined Korean uprising that emerged from the confluence of ethnic and colonial tensions and disaster led to the massacre of over six thousand Koreans.

Film director Akira Kurosawa describes his experiences in the earthquake, including references to the hysteria over the Koreans, in his autobiography. In this excerpt, he compares the scene of the aftermath to hell. “The people who stood to the left and right of me in this scene looked for all the world like fugitives from hell and



Figure 3. “Mr. Moneybags’s treasure leaving port” (*Mochimaru takara no defune*). Miyata and Takeda, 225, print number 108.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

The Ansei earthquake could be part of class sessions on late Edo and the Meiji restoration, in addition to a general review of disasters and disaster myths in the world. The Filipino legend of Bernardo de Carpio is particularly relevant. According to legend, he was a revolutionary hero trapped in rock by the Spanish. Robert Kovach’s book *Early Earthquakes of the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) is a good resource on earthquake myths in ancient societies in North, South, and Central America. Younger students might be interested in the list of earthquake legends compiled by FEMA at <http://www.fema.gov/kids/eqlegnd.htm>.

Despite the variety of earthquake legends around the world, I am unaware of any phenomenon similar to the *namazu-e*. Nevertheless, transposing myths to apply to the current political situation can be seen in the political cartoons of Daumier and Thomas Nast. One famous example is Nast depicting General Grant in “Prometheus Bound.” For the image and commentary, see www.thomasnast.com.



Figure 4: Refugees under a makeshift shelter on train tracks.
Photo courtesy of Brown University Library.

the whole landscape took on a bizarre and eerie aspect. . . . I was still shaking as I gazed out over the scene, thinking “This must be the end of the world.”⁸ Kurosawa’s encounter with corpses while touring the ruins with his brother is shown as a confrontation with fear and death. Perhaps this could account for the unglamorous depiction of violence and destruction in many of his films.⁹

After the Kantō earthquake, prominent figures proffered their visions of the new Tokyo that would rise from the ashes. They took the earthquake as an opportunity to imagine the future in a thoroughly modern fashion. Government officials and conservative intellectuals saw the earthquake as a chance to correct the course of the nation—from decadence spawned by prosperity to moral fortitude. An imperial edict issued not long after the earthquake stated:

*In recent years, much progress has been made in science and human wisdom. At the same time, frivolous and extravagant habits have set in, and even rash and extreme tendencies are not unknown. If these habits and tendencies are not checked now, the future of the country, we fear, is dark, the disaster which befell the Japanese nation being very severe. It may not be possible to hope for the restoration of national culture and prosperity unless the determined will of the whole nation is aroused. This is the time when the people must be one in their courageous endeavor for the prosperity and expansion of the country.*¹⁰

This edict stops short of laying the blame on the evils of the times, but other pundits held no punches; “punishment from heaven” was a common part of the post-disaster discourse. This was a more secular punishment—divorced from Buddhist or even Shintō cosmology—linked to ideas of nationhood espoused by the government. The imperial edict makes clear that traditional morals were necessary to weather the disaster.

In contrast, author Tanizaki Jun’ichirō saw the earthquake as an opportunity for Tokyo to remake itself as an even more decadent metropolis.

Fragments of the new Tokyo passed before my eyes, numberless, like flashes in a movie. Soirees, evening dresses and swallowtails and dinner

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The Great Kantō Earthquake was a modern disaster and was photographed like one. Kerry Smith of Brown University has put together a wonderful collection of these images on the Web at: <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/kanto/>.

It is also possible to download newsreels of the time from the Sasayama city Web site: <http://edu.city.sasayama.hyogo.jp/video/kantodaisinsai.html>.

A similar photographic and cinematic record can be found of the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. The Library of Congress has collected many of these and made them available over the Internet. These sites are a good place to start.

Films: <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/collections/sffilm/history.html>.

Images: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri131.html>.

One thing both the images and the films portray is the degree of devastation and the ways people suffered. See, for example, the image of refugees reproduced in Figure 4. There were also large collections of stories revealing individual suffering; unfortunately, little is available in English translation.¹¹ Two important options are Kurosawa’s autobiography and Sata Ineko’s memoir “Elegy,” translated and collected in Lawrence Roger’s *Tokyo Stories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002). Gennifer Weisenfeld offers a comprehensive look at artists’ responses to the earthquake in her article “Imagining Calamity: Artists in the Capital After the Great Kantō Earthquake.”¹² She includes images and analysis—including a 1924 reworking of a namazu-e.

“Super-Frog Saves Tokyo,” draws on elements of the namazu myth in a fantastic story of sacrifice and heroism.

*jackets moving in and out and champagne glasses floating up like the moon upon the ocean. The confusion of late night outside a theater, headlights crossing one another on darkly shining streets. The flood of gauze and satin and legs and illumination that is vaudeville. The seductive laughter of streetwalkers beneath the lights of Ginza and Asakusa and Marunouchi and Hibiya Park. The secret pleasures of Turkish baths, massage parlors, beauty parlors. Weird crimes.*¹³

These two visions of the future reveal competing hopes for the development of the nation. They offer concrete examples of both the cosmopolitanism and the conservatism that characterize Taishō Japan. In the short run, Tanizaki’s vision won out. The years following the earthquake marked the flowering of popular culture and the erotic-grotesque nonsense that celebrated “Turkish baths” and “weird crimes.” At the same time, conservative and nationalistic elements in the government grew stronger until decadence was swept from the nation in the build-up to total war.

Although the Kantō quake hit when Japan’s economy was at a relative peak, the Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 struck not long after the 1980s economic bubble burst. The Aum Shinrikyō subway gassing incident only two months after the quake added to the sense of crisis in nineties Japan. Murakami Haruki wrote in his non-fiction treatment of the gassings, *Underground*, that these two events “arriving as they did at the time when Japan’s ‘bubble economy’ burst, marking the end of those times of rampant excess, ushered in a period of critical inquiry into the very roots of the Japanese state. It was as if these events had been lying in wait for us.” He continues, “Both were nightmarish eruptions beneath our feet—from underground—that threw all the latent contradictions and weak points of our society into frighteningly high relief.”¹⁴ Murakami’s assertion that disasters call attention to “weak points” in society can be seen in both history and recent news—hurricane Katrina for example. For Murakami, however, disasters not only reveal social problems, but spiritual problems as well. An ill-defined sense of crisis permeates his collection of short stories set in the weeks following the Hanshin earthquake, translated as *after the quake*.

The most amusing story in the collection, “Super-Frog Saves Tokyo,” draws on elements of the namazu myth in a fantastic story of sacrifice and heroism. In this story, a mysterious giant frog, appropriately called “Frog,” visits a bank employee named Katagiri. Frog wants Mr. Katagiri to help him save Tokyo from a devastating earthquake that will happen unless Frog fights and defeats the giant worm underneath Tokyo. It is unclear exactly why Frog chooses Katagiri to help him, but it may be connected to his profession. Bad loans were a large part of the economy of the 1980s. When the bubble burst, it was ordinary bank officials, like Katagiri, who had to take care of the mess. They were the unsung heroes of the post-bubble world. The story highlights Murakami’s interest in subterranean worlds and the fantastic, but also connects the earthquake with the bubble economy in a very specific way.



Murakami Haruki.
Image source: *The Sidney Morning Herald* at
www.smu.com.au.
Photo: Eiichiro Iwasa

Top: Frog images from the paperback cover of *After the Quake* (Vintage, 2003).

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After the quake was published in America soon after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and it resonated with American readers. In an interview with *The Japan Times*, Murakami commented on this connection.

*When I wrote those stories, I was thinking about the earthquake and the sarin gas attack by Aum Shinrikyō. But, I think the September 11 attack is directly connected. It was a huge catastrophe, but humans caused it. I think that’s why American readers feel sympathy with that book. If it was only about the earthquake, the sympathy would be weaker, but that book is about the violence in nature and the violence in human beings.*¹⁵

The radio show *This American Life* played segments of Murakami’s *Underground: the Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* in Act Three of the “Before and After” broadcast on September 21, 2001—soon after the September 11 catastrophe. It is available via online streaming, and one can download it from the archives at http://www.thislife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?episode=194.

Teaching students not only that disasters happened, but how people at the time made sense of them, offers historical insight into society and culture that may be missed otherwise.

Another story in the collection, “UFO in Kushiro,” both draws and undercuts the connection between the earthquake and more personal disasters. In this story, the wife of protagonist Komura suddenly leaves him after watching earthquake footage for five straight days. (Murakami seems to be commenting here on the media overload during a disaster.) Later, on a trip to overcome the sense of loss, Komura tells two mysterious women (Keiko and Shimaō) about his wife’s disappearance. Keiko first responds by asking:

“Did it have something to do with the earthquake?”

Komura shook his head. “Probably not. I don’t think so.”

“Still I wonder if things like that aren’t connected somehow,” Shimaō said with a tilt of her head.

“Yeah,” Keiko said. “It’s just that you can’t see how.”¹⁶

In this interaction, Murakami highlights the way people try to make—or even feel that there may be—a connection between large-scale disasters and disasters in their own lives, all the while recognizing the impossibility. Murakami’s characters work to give the earthquake meaning, to use it as a means to make sense of their own lives. That effort is thwarted constantly. In the end, Murakami connects the disaster with feelings of unease; but in true postmodern fashion, he offers no solution. Rather, the earthquake becomes one manifestation of the vague apprehension toward modern life palpable in many of his stories.

Each of these examples shows how different earthquakes were given different and even competing meanings. Whereas Chōmei’s account of his reclusion offers a way to make sense of the evils of the times and to escape them, in some Ansei namazu-e, the earthquake is a positive correction to the problems of society. The excerpts from the imperial edict and Tanizaki’s essay show how the Kantō earthquake played a role in imagining a brighter future, but Murakami’s stories connect the disasters of the 1990s to show the dark underside of modern life. Despite their differences, these glimpses of various earthquakes in the cultural imagination can enrich discussions of disasters in class by offering more intimate responses to the events than mere facts can provide. Teaching students not only that disasters happened, but how people at the time made sense of them, offers historical insight into society and culture that may be missed otherwise. ■

NOTES

1. For the poem see: *Nihon shoki*, vol. 2, *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 68, Iwanami Shoten, 1965, 10.
2. Mappō was thought to have begun in 1052 CE. For more on mappō and the Hōjōki in general, see Michele Marra, *The Aesthetics of Discontent: Politics and Reclusion in Medieval Japanese Literature*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1991), 71.
3. Kamo no Chōmei, “Record of the Ten-Foot Square Hut,” Burton Watson, trans. In *Four Huts: Asian Writings on the Simple Life* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1994), 47.
4. This one unnatural disaster stands out among the others, but the imagery of mansions abandoned, broken up, and floating downstream fits with Chōmei’s emphasis on houses and resonates well with the opening lines.
5. Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, G. H. McWilliam, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 13.
6. Gregory Smits explores this connection, and namazu-e, in more detail in his article, “Shaking Up Japan: Edo Society and the 1855 Catfish Picture Prints,” *Journal of Social History* 39.4 (Summer 2006), 1045–1078. He includes specific analysis of several prints from several genres.
7. Other variants to this explanation exist, including one that suggests that the animal culprit is an ox or a snake, but by the time of the Ansei Earthquake, the catfish was the predominant legend in Edo. See Smits, 1051.
8. Kurosawa Akira, *Something Like an Autobiography*, Audie Bock, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 50.
9. This episode in Kurosawa’s life is also part of the documentary *Kurosawa* directed by Adam Low, WNET, BBC-Arena and NHK, 2001 (released on DVD by Wellspring in 2002). The documentary also suggests that Kurosawa’s experiences after the quake influenced some of his films, particularly *Kagemusha*.
10. Fujisawa Morihiko. *The Great Earthquake of 1923 in Japan* (Naimusho, 1926), frontispiece.
11. For more information on this phenomenon in the Ansei earthquake, please see Andrew Markus, “*Gesaku* Authors and the Ansei Earthquake of 1855.” In *Studies in Modern Japanese Literature*, Dennis Washburn and Alan Tansman, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). The article includes excerpts from representative works. For a look at some of these stories in the 1923 quake, see my dissertation,

- “Fractured Communities: Class and Ethnicity in Representations of the Great Kantō Earthquake” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2006).
12. In *Modern Boy, Modern Girl*, Jackie Menzies, ed. (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998), 124–129.
13. Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, “Tokyo wo omou” (“Thinking of Tokyo”), excerpt translated by Edward Seidensticker in *Low City, High City* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 15. Seidensticker’s study of Tokyo is for the general reader. The first chapter in particular has a wealth of information on the earthquake.
14. Murakami Haruki, *Underground*, Alfred Birnbaum and J. Philip Gabriel, trans. (New York: Vintage International, 2001), 237.
15. Roland Kelts, “Writer on the borderline.” *The Japan Times*, Sunday, Dec. 1, 2002
16. Murakami Haruki, “UFO in Kushiro,” in *after the quake*, Jay Rubin, trans. (Vintage, 2002), 14–15.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

“The Ten Foot Square Hut”

“Hōjōki” translations (oldest to most recent), including the first few lines for comparison:

“The Ten Foot Square Hut.” A.L. Sadler, trans. In *The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970. (Originally published in 1928.)

“Ceaselessly the river flows, and yet the water is never the same, while in the still pools the shifting foam gathers and is gone, never staying for a moment. Even so is man and his habitation.”

“An Account of my Hut.” Donald Keene, trans. In *Anthology of Japanese Literature from the Earliest Era to the Mid-nineteenth Century*, New York: Grove Press, 1955.

“The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same. The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing now forming, are not of long duration; so in the world are man and his dwellings.”

“An Account of my Hermitage.” Helen Craig McCullough, trans. In *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

“The waters of a flowing stream are ever present but never the same; the bubbles in a quiet pool disappear and form but never endure for long. So it is with men and their dwellings in the world.”

“Record of the Ten-Foot Square Hut” Burton Watson, trans. In *Four Huts: Asian Writings on the Simple Life*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1994.

“The river flows on unceasingly, but the water is never the same water as before. Bubbles that bob on the surfaces of the still places disappear one moment to reappear again the next, but they seldom endure for long. And so it is with the people of this world and with the houses they live in.”

Hōjōki: Visions of a Torn World, Michael Hofmann, trans. Stone Bridge Press, 1996.

“The flowing river never stops and yet the water never stays the same. Foam floats upon the pools, scattering, reforming, never lingering for long. So it is with man and his dwelling places here on earth.”

The Ansei Earthquake

Miyata, Noboru and Mamoru Takada. *Namazu-e: Shinsai to Nihon Bunka*. Ribun Shuppan, 1995.

Miyata and Takeda’s collection is the definitive work on namazu-e. It contains many color prints, including the ones reproduced for this article.

Ouweland, Cornelius. *Namazu-e and their Themes; an Interpretative Approach to some Aspects of Japanese Folk Religion*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964.

Ouweland provides a comprehensive look at *namazu-e* and the folk belief behind them.

Meiji and Great Kantō Earthquakes

Clancey, Gregory. *Earthquake Nation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Hammer, Joshua. *Yokohama Burning*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

Hammer’s book is a journalistic exploration of the earthquake mostly from the point of view of foreigners.

Kawabata, Ryōshi, Nanpō Katayama, Michiaki Kawakita, and Isamu Iijima. *Kawabata Ryōshi, Katayama Nanpō*. Gendai Nihon Emaki Zenshū, vol. 13. Shōgakkan, 1984.

This rare book contains a long (over twenty feet) narrative scroll depicting the Kantō earthquake (folded into book size). It includes a scene depicting harassment of Koreans.

Murakami Haruki

Rubin, Jay. *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*. London: Harvill Press, 2002.

Rubin’s in-depth study of Murakami includes a chapter on this part of his life.

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