November 2012

To the Members of the Middlebury Class of 2016.5—

We look forward to welcoming you to campus in February. We are writing to you as Commons Heads, the faculty and staff leaders of the commons system. In this role, we work alongside students to cultivate your intellectual interests and extend the learning environment beyond the classroom and into dinner conversations in the dining halls, or late night discussions on your hall. During orientation in early February, we will gather together in small groups along with other faculty, staff and upper class students to take part in a campus-wide Common Reading discussion. This will afford us one of many such opportunities for shared intellectual exchanges during your time at Middlebury College.

This year’s Common Reading selection is Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Ishiguro, who was born in post-war Nagasaki, Japan but raised in England from the age of six, is one of the most acclaimed fiction writers in the English-speaking world. Among his numerous literary awards, Ishiguro has received four nominations for the Booker Prize, which he won in 1989 with *The Remains of the Day*. His narratives take us on compelling journeys into the minds of characters who struggle to overcome loss and maintain a sense of self by seeking to understand the past through acts of remembrance. While his work is often preoccupied with interiors, his evocative descriptions are highly visual: it is no accident that two of his novels, including the most recent *Never Let Me Go*, have been adapted into films.

On the surface, *Never Let Me Go* is a coming-of-age story of three young people. Set in 1990s England, it is narrated by Kathy, a thirty-one-year-old woman, who immediately draws the reader into the recollections of her life at the idyllic boarding school where she grew up. She and her best friends, Ruth and Tommy, are encouraged by their teachers to create works of art from an early age, to bond with each other, and to take good care of their health. There are no parents in their world, only a handful of teachers referred to as ‘guardians,’ some of whom seem deeply troubled by their position at the school. In fact, the enigmatic narrative contains a dark secret, as it is gradually revealed that both the narrator and her young friends are ‘special’ human beings with an idealized medical purpose in life. What emerges, as Kathy’s reminiscences unfold, is a life of preparation for a special role in a world that has begun to exploit the medical possibilities of genetic technology. Ishiguro’s quietly disturbing novel aims to engage us in a contemplation of ethical questions in scientific research, even though the author refrains from addressing the topic directly.

A tale of deceptive simplicity, *Never Let Me Go* slowly attains extraordinary emotional depth and resonance, as the author explores, with clarity and compassion, the questions of the meaning of life and human mortality at that critical turning point, when adolescents become young adults, and consider relationships, identity, and moral choices. As Ishiguro stated in an interview: “There are
things I am more interested in than the clone thing. How are [the characters] trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter?"

We hope that you will find *Never Let Me Go* a good and challenging read and that the issues raised in this hauntingly beautiful novel will help you reflect on your own journeys critically and profoundly. We also expect that when we compare notes in February we’ll find a wide range of responses. Our Common Reading experience will give you a chance to share your observations and ideas with your peers and to learn from one another. That’s the nature of our intellectual community—we prize thoughtful conversations, new insights, and diverse perspectives and we are looking forward to your contributions.

For some stimulating questions that can start you thinking, we would encourage you to consult the Reader’s Guide for the novel at the publisher’s website (http://www.randomhouse.com/book/85609/never-let-me-go-by-kazuo-ishiguro) and at the back of the book.

We wish you a fulfilling Febmester and look forward to meeting you in February. In the meantime, enjoy the novel!

From your Commons Heads

Pete and Michelle Nelson, Atwater Commons
Roman Graf, Brainerd Commons
Patricia Zupan, Cook Commons
Pavlos Sfyroeras and Maria Hatjigeorgiou, Ross Commons
Jonathan Miller-Lane, Wonnacott Commons