

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running Study Guide

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running by Haruki Murakami

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Plot Summary

"What I Talk About When I Talk About Running" is a memoir by Haruki Murakami. Murakami is a successful professional writer and an amateur runner. Murakami was born and raised in Japan, but spent many years in Hawaii and at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a professor and lecturer.

Murakami was the kind of kid who would be found reading alone in his room while the other kids were playing outside. An intellectual child, he learned a lot from his books but did not learn about sports and team playing, which most of his peers focused on. Murakami was also a loner and felt socially inept in many ways. He married young and forced himself to be more social but it was always a struggle and that private, isolated part of him always lingered. He had the perfect personality for a runner.

Murakami loved the arts including music. He was a huge fan of jazz music and opened up a club outside Tokyo. By the time he was thirty, he had become a success and was able to hire others to run the day-to-day operation of the club. Finally, he was a young man with time on his hands. It was then that he first became interested in running. He had the time and there seemed to be an internal need to condition and challenge his body.

Concurrently, Murakami had the first inkling that he'd like to write, tell stories that other people would like to read. He wrote his first book by hand and sent it off to a publisher without having a copy of it. Fortunately, it came to the publisher's notice and was eventually published. It was followed by other books and soon Murakami was recognized as an outstanding writer.

Murakami saw many parallels between his avocation of running and his pursuit of writing as a career. In order to run and do well in marathons and triathlons, Murakami had to be in the right mindset. He had to have a clear mind and a positive attitude. He had to have been able to vanquish the toxin within him that made him lose confidence and expect and accept defeat. Likewise in writing, Murakami found that he had to be in peak physical condition to begin a writing project. It helped him to have a clear mind and to focus his talent and energy in a way that would produce the successful end product that he strove to create.

Despite the difficult times Murakami experienced in both his career and in his running and conditioning routine and pursuits, he learned to not become discouraged by minor failures, to keep that internal toxic at bay and to forge on. The more he ran, the better runner he became. The more he wrote, the better the writer he became. In the end, however, he felt he would not have been successful in either pursuit without success in the other.



Chapter One: Who's Going to Laugh at Mick Jagger?

Chapter One: Who's Going to Laugh at Mick Jagger? Summary and Analysis

August 5, 2005, Kauai, Hawaii

On Hawaii, there are four seasons even though there doesn't seem to be. Summer is slightly hotter than winter. But it is paradise compared to humid summers in Cambridge, Massachusetts where Haruki Murakami spent a lot of time. In Hawaii no air conditioning is necessary. Just open the windows and let the trade winds blow in. He runs about an hour six or seven days a week. Just like writing, he stops running just when he thinks he can do more. It's setting the pace that works for each writer just as Ernest Hemingway did. As far as conditioning as a runner, Haruki is half way between the out of shape runners who huff and puff and the energetic ones who zip past him. He likes to listen to Lovin' Spoonful when he runs. It reminds him of his youth.

Haruki began living in Cambridge at the end of May. He had begun running six hours a day six days a week - 36 hours a week - with one day off for rest. There was a point when his life became too complicated to run and he dialed it back. He became interested in triathlons which meant he had to devote time to swimming and cycling. He had also grown tired of running. It all began in 1982 and he'd been running regularly for twenty-three years. Overall, it did make him stronger.

Never having brothers, Haruki never became interested in team sports like soccer or baseball. He's not good at one-on-one sports like tennis. He's best when competing against himself and trying to beat his prior times. Success to Haruki is meeting his personal goals. An ordinary runner feels gratified just to do his or her best. Writing is the same. It's not the number of books sold. It's the quality of what one has written and whether it attained a personal goal. He runs everyday to elevate his stamina.

After age 40, he found that it was no longer possible to improve his time. He had reached his personal peak. Writing is different. Dostoyevsky wrote his two most famous books just before his death at age 60. As a runner, Haruki attained his personal best in his late forties. He decided it would be best to diversify and got into squash and triathlon. He found he didn't enjoy running as much and he was fatigued.

Haruki last lived in Cambridge from 1993 to 1995 when Bill Clinton was President. While things looked the same, everything was different. He was ten years older for one thing. After he got settled, he decided to get down to some serious running through the familiar Cambridge terrain. The jogging path along the Charles River goes on forever. He runs to the Red Hot Chili Peppers and oldies like Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Beach Boys.



In July he ran a total of 186 miles. It was rigorous. He lost seven pounds and some flab in just the first two months. He likes running alone. He doesn't find being alone at all painful. He was the type of kid who would be happy reading alone in his room while friends played outside. He married young and forced himself to be a little more sociable. But the desire to be alone still remains.

On cold days, he thinks about how cold it is as he runs. When he feels upbeat, he thinks about his happiness. Random thoughts flit in and out of his mind. But running is a kind of purging of the mind and soul. He runs until he reaches a void when old thoughts and memories vanish. In that state, he can appreciate the clouds and the sky. Now in his fifties, he's surprised he reached that milestone. Mick Jagger once thought it would be laughable to be singing "Satisfaction" at forty-five. Now that he's in his sixties and still singing it, it doesn't seem so funny.

As a younger man, Haruki hated criticism or to be misunderstood. But as an older man, he realizes that all that criticism important and necessary. Emotional hurt is a building block to becoming strong and independent. However, the criticism still hurts and makes him run longer and farther. He can understand why people don't take to him because he's so closed. But when someone doesn't like him, it hurts none the less. Like running, writing is a solitary pursuit.

He got back into the running lifestyle in his late fifties in Hawaii. But he realized he had to accept that as the body grows old, it functions differently and time takes its toll. But Haruki is still able to run long and hard enough to reach that comfortable void that he seeks.



Chapter Two: Tips on Becoming a Running Novelist

Chapter Two: Tips on Becoming a Running Novelist Summary and Analysis

August 14, 2005 - Kauai, Hawaii

On the morning of August 14th, Haruki ran an hour and fifteen minutes. In the afternoon he swam 1,400 yards in the pool and then had an evening swim in the ocean. So far in August, he had run 93 miles. He had first begun running on a daily basis in 1982. He had been running a jazz club near Sendagaya Station which he ran for three years. Later, he moved the club closer to Tokyo. It was a bigger success than his friends had predicted. His wife was a great help. He struggled for years but by the time he was thirty, he had worked hard, paid most of his loans off and could hire people to work for him. He had time on his hands and it was then that the idea of writing a novel first occurred to him.

By the spring of 1978, he finished a two-hundred page handwritten work. He shipped it off to a publisher without even having a copy of it. But the book, "Hear the Wind Sing," was ultimately published. His second novel was entitled, "Pinball, 1973." He was also writing several short stories and had translated some of F. Scott Fitzgerald's works. Both his novels were nominated for the prestigious Akutagawa Prize although neither won. He continued a busy schedule for the next three years of writing and running his business.

Haruki loved writing but was dubious about his style. He wrote in spurts and then would run out of gas. He figured that the jazz club was taking time from his writing and decided to close the business for a while and concentrate on his writing. This move was against the advise of most people he knew. But his wife supported his decision to sell the business. After devoting two years to writing, he could reopen his business if his writing didn't take off. By the next year he completed, "A Wild Sheep Chase." With the completion of this book, Haruki felt he had established his own unique style. The story wasn't considered mainstream and wasn't received well by his publisher.

It occurred to Haruki that he needed an outlet for all the solitary hours he devoted to writing. That was when he first took up running. The family had moved to a more rural area called Narashino which had no sports facilities so running was an organic choice. Another benefit from running, it forced him to give up smoking. He never liked gym at school when he was forced to perform. However, choosing to run was a completely different feeling. Haruki took on a disciplined lifestyle of going to bed early and getting up early which he maintained during the next twenty-four years. He felt that he was being loyal to his readers by living a lifestyle that would allow him to steadily improve his writing. He always felt a strong relationship and responsibility to his readers.



With each work, the number of readers increased. Although his writing was popular he was not the top writer but he was able to write what he wanted to write. Running at first was difficult. He could not last long. But he persisted and began to acquire more wind. He read about running and bought equipment to help him but his biggest asset was the naturally healthy body he was blessed with. He continued to extend himself and strove to run further and further. He participated in marathons from 5K and 15K to over twenty-two miles. His body was beginning to change but it had not yet transformed into a runner's physique. His legs were too skinny. But everyday, he made progress and gained more muscle. The regimen was good for him since he gained weight quite easily. Just as he had to work and build his abilities to run, he had to work hard and build on his writing talents.

Just like writing is not for everyone, running isn't either. He holds the belief that everyone will find his own way in life. If a person is a runner, he will eventually turn to it. The same goes for writing. All the training in the world does not make a runner or a writer - much of it is either inborn talent or a burning drive to achieve - neither can be taught. He had the drive to do both. At thirty-three years of age he became a serious writer.



Chapter Three: Athens in Midsummer - Running 26.2 Miles for the First Time

Chapter Three: Athens in Midsummer - Running 26.2 Miles for the First Time Summary and Analysis

September 1, 2005 - Kauai, Hawaii

Haruki ran a total of 217 miles for the month of August. He was preparing for the New York City Marathon scheduled for November 6. The weather on the islands had been cooperating with his running schedule - no rain at all. The heat didn't bother him but he made sure to stay away from cold drinks and supplement his water level with fruits and vegetables. Another part of his regimen was to get plenty of sleep, even taking frequent naps. He devoted the months after August to increasing his endurance and pace. He transformed the quantity of his exercise to the quality of his exercise. He learned to listen to the feedback from his body.

The worst marathon experience Haruki had was in a race that took place in Chiba Prefecture. Inexplicably, his legs cramped up at around 18 miles into the race. He tried to stretch his legs out but the cramps persisted. He was forced to walk the last three miles of the meet. He had to face the harsh coldness of the air once he stopped running. While running, the body is warm and doesn't experience cold air the same way as when it is walking or stationary. The reason he failed was that he had not had adequate training. He realized that he assumed he was in better shape than he was and hadn't needed extensive training but he was wrong - perhaps a little arrogant. But one learns more from failure than from success and he would be better prepared next time. His focus is on the New York Marathon in two months. Writing about it helped him to organize for it.

On August 25, Runner's World magazine did a photo shoot with Haruki. The photos would accompany an interview they had already conducted with him. The article was called "Running Novelist." He would be recognized by the other runners in the marathon which put added pressure on him to do well. He had participated in the Greek Marathon in 1983 but actually ran it backwards to avoid traffic. He had done so for his own benefit and had been hired by a travel magazine to write an article about it. He completed his first full marathon running all twenty-six miles. The only time he panicked about his run from Athens to Marathon was when he realized how blazing hot the Greek sun was. To adjust for the heat, he ran very early before the sun was too brutal. The photographers and reporters on hand couldn't believe that he intended to run the entire marathon.

When the sun rose, he was a ball of perspiration, had discarded his shirt and was very thirsty. It was a personal achievement when he passed the twenty-two mile marker because he'd never run more than that before. He almost gave up at mile twenty-three but persevered. At twenty-five miles, he knew it was almost over with just one mile left.



He was happy to see the finish line but when he crossed it, he did not experience a feeling of accomplishment, only relief. It took him three hours and fifty-one minutes which wasn't great time but he did complete the run. The Athens Marathon was the toughest competition he had ever participated in. The next race was in Hawaii. It was hot but nothing compared to Athens. He learned a lot about himself as a runner. He would repeat the same pattern of stamina in subsequent races. The pain and misery of the marathon always faded for him after a time.



Chapter Four: Most of What I Know About Writing Fiction I learned by Running Every Day

Chapter Four: Most of What I Know About Writing Fiction I learned by Running Every Day Summary and Analysis

September 19, 2005 - Tokyo

On September 10, Haruki left Hawaii for a two-week trip to Japan. There are more distractions in Japan than in Hawaii and he didn't have as much time to devote to running. He is barely running six miles a day but never takes two days off in a row. Muscles can get lazy if one's conditioning routines changes dramatically. He did challenge himself by taking on more hills which would mimic the final leg of the NY Marathon that ends up in a hilly area in Central Park.

While in Japan, Haruki's new short-story collection entitled, "Strange Tales from Tokyo" was released. He was busy with interviews and other responsibilities regarding his book. But he did not ignore his conditioning routine and ran around the Jingu Gaien which are the outer gardens of the Meiji Shrine one of his favorite places to run in Tokyo. Professional runners also practice ran in the gardens. Two Olympic runners that Haruki used to encounter on the course were both killed in an automobile accident. It was a terrible waste and greatly saddened Haruki.

In every interview for his book, Haruki is asked what he thinks the most important quality for a writer to have is. Of course, talent and the amount of talent one might have is not something that can necessarily be controlled. Just as important as talent is focus. If a talented writer cannot focus his talent, then he may as well not have any. Focus is a fragile state which can be interrupted by noise, pain or worry. And, just like a runner, a good writer has to have endurance because writing a book is a challenge even if one has talent and focus. Through discipline, a writer will improve his work by strengthening his endurance and focus. Many people think that writing looks easy - until they try it. Those with only limited talent have to rely on their focus and endurance to compensate for lack of literary genius.

Just as runners slow down with age, writers often do as well. However, there are a handful of writers who are so talented that the well never dries up - Shakespeare, Balzac and Dickens are a few examples. Haruki has learned a lot about writing through his running. He knows he must learn how far he can push himself, how much rest is necessary, and when he needs to be confident and when he needs to question himself. Running is so much more than putting one foot in front of the other. It is a way to



experience life at its fullest. Exerting oneself to a personal best can only have positive results. The body and the mind operate as a team so it is not farfetched to see a correlation between a function of the body like running and a function of the intellect like writing.

Each person has his limits in anything he takes on. It is essential that everyone understands his potential and his limits. Haruki learned that for his particular muscle structure, he must take a long time to warm up or else he pays with cramps, pulls and tears. Haruki knows when he reaches his optimum heart rate while running which is important for stamina and endurance.



Chapter Five: Even If I had a Long Ponytail Back Then

Chapter Five: Even If I had a Long Ponytail Back Then Summary and Analysis

October 3, 2005 - Cambridge, Massachusetts

There are a few summer days in Boston that are nearly unbearable. The rich escape to cooler climates leaving the city quieter and less crowded. Summer fades into autumn the season when running is most pleasant. But soon that brief period passes and the inevitable winter arrives causing runners to wear gloves and wool caps pulled down over their ears. When the weather is too harsh, runners retreat to indoor conditioning. But when weather is good, Haruki loves to run by the Charles River. He thinks it's beneficial for humans to be around large bodies of water. Lakes and rivers and oceans reflect the sky and the cloud and life.

It is just a month away from the New York Marathon. He has been racking up many miles of practice each month in anticipation of the race. He also bought a new pair of Mizuno running shoes, his personal preference. But he needs to break them in before the marathon. Running by the river each morning, he sees many people who have participated in marathons in the past.

While running, Haruki often focuses his thoughts on writing. In Japan, many people believe that a person cannot live a healthy lifestyle that includes running and also be a great writer. To these people, the two disciplines are diametrically opposed to one another. While he thinks that is an extreme view, he does recognize that writing can be unhealthy and antisocial. Each writer at one point must deal with the toxin within him. A healthy soul requires a healthy body. But every writer is different and for Haruki he must feel physically conditioned in order to take on the challenge of writing a novel. As a writer grows older, sometimes the sheer exhaustion of the challenge is too much. It's called "literary burnout." Creativity is sustained by physical fitness. When the body deteriorates the spirit declines in kind.

Haruki will be giving a lecture at MIT and practices his speech as he runs - not out loud but in his mind. In Japan it was rare that he was ever called upon to speak publicly. What makes speaking at MIT more challenging is that English is not Haruki's forte. He has to choose words for his speech that are easy for him to pronounce. While running and reciting his speech to himself, he is bolstered by the rhythm of the run which is in cadence of the words.



Chapter Six: Nobody Pounded the Table Anymore, Nobody Threw Their Cups

Chapter Six: Nobody Pounded the Table Anymore, Nobody Threw Their Cups Summary and Analysis

June 23, 1996, Lake Saroma, Hokkaido

On one occasion, Haruki ran sixty-two miles in one day. Not many people can make that claim. His run went from morning until night. It had a lot of meaning for Haruki as a runner. He gained a deeper understanding of himself with that challenge. The race took place in Saroma in Hokkaido in June which is early summer in the region. The path runs around the shores of the lake which faces the Sea of Okhotsk. Making this run is the first time many people realize just how large the lake is! It is an idyllic setting replete with flower gardens and grazing cattle. There are checkpoints every six miles along the way. If a runner exceeds the time for a lap, he is automatically disqualified and doesn't continue.

There is a taunting sign at 26 miles that reminds the runner that they have just run a marathon - but are not done. At thirty-one miles his legs were beginning to feel the punishment. At thirty-four miles, he changed his clothes at the rest stop and ate a snack. He rested nearly ten minutes and then stretched and drank water. He forced himself to run on. He swung his arms in powerful circles, transmitting the energy to his beleaguered legs. The rest of the run was excruciating. As he ran, one by one different parts of his body began to cry out in pain. Soon the pain was migrating everywhere. His muscles had never run sixty miles before and were being tortured. Haruki kept telling his body to hang in there. Other runners had stopped running and walked the rest of the way. But to Haruki that wasn't an option. He hadn't come all that way to "walk" in a race. At the forty-seven mile marker, Haruki knew he had made it. He felt a physical transformation like he'd pass through a stone wall. At that point he began passing runners who earlier had passed him up. He felt he had entered a metaphysical plain. Haruki showed his elation when he ran through the finish line. Although he was exhausted and sat down for the first time all day, he felt a sense of completion. He did suffer from sore legs for days after the marathon. He had over extended himself but the happiness he felt was worth it.

One unexpected side effect from the lengthy marathon was something he dubbed "runner's blues." It made him lose enthusiasm for running. Fatigue was only part of it. He began to run less after that marathon. The marathons he did enter gained him increasingly longer times. He no longer considered running the center of his life.

Eventually the blues began to fade and he returned to a daily running schedule. Perhaps returning to Cambridge renewed his interest. Maybe an internal adjustment was needed for his physical well being and for his intellectual pursuits, especially

writing. When he resumed his running, it was obvious to him that competition and timing were not important. What was important was enjoying himself.

Chapter Seven: Autumn in New York

Chapter Seven: Autumn in New York Summary and Analysis

October 30, 2005 - Cambridge, Massachusetts

A long autumn rain ensued perhaps in protest to the loss by the Boston Red Sox in the playoffs. After some real downpours, the rain let up. On October 9, Haruki ran a half a marathon. He was preparing for the New York Marathon. His time was one hour and fifty-five minutes. The reaction to running a half marathon is the feeling of "is that all" when crossing the finish line. More rain and a business trip out of town interrupted his training. On October 17, while walking down a flight of stairs, his knee buckled. It felt unsteady and he couldn't put any weight on it. Running especially on concrete is punishing on the knees. He had never suffered a serious injury before and he was sure his knee would be fine. Still, it bothered him as he lay in bed that night. But it finally settled down and Haruki felt he could keep his appointment with the New York Marathon.

Haruki's lecture at MIT went very well. The room was filled and he was well received. He continued his translation of the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald. The weather improved and Haruki was able to get in more practice and run further differences. His knee seemed fine. He still worried whether his confidence would remain strong or if doom and gloom was lingering and waiting to ambush him. As he practice ran, he envisioned the sights of New York City to inspire him. Haruki had participated in four NYC marathons. They're held in the fall and he is always reminded of the ballad, "Autumn in New York" when there for the race.



Chapter Eight: 18 Till I Die

Chapter Eight: 18 Till I Die Summary and Analysis

August 26, 2006 - In a Seaside Town in Kanagawa Prefecture

Haruki is training for the triathlon and is focusing on cycling. His muscles are stiff from this training. He feels he must focus on cycling because running and swimming are more natural pursuits for him. The cycling is frightening in that his practice runs are in congested streets and heavy traffic with drivers who are largely unconcerned with the safety of pedestrians and cyclists. He's not especially nimble, and being so is necessary in order to weave in and out of the traffic. But he has a light weight titanium sports bike which makes maneuvering easier. Despite conditions, he grabs his water bottle and dons his biking helmet and mounts his bike. Bicycle training is a difficult and lonely experience. The weather, especially the wind, has an impact on the training.

Haruki's time at Harvard ended in June and he packed up to return to Japan. One treasure trove he collected while in the States was a large collection of LPs. In November of 2005 he ran in the NYC Marathon as planned. He did a practice run but didn't have great time. But he had trained and was in good physical shape and had hopes that he would do well in the actual race.

Up to mile marker 18 in the actual competition, Haruki was able to keep up with his pacemaker. But his legs started to stiffen and he began to fall behind. He got a cramp in one calve which forced him to stop running and walk. He did complete the marathon but his time was nothing to brag about. The next April he tried his luck in the Boston Marathon and his time was on par with the his New York Marathon time.

Haruki didn't take up writing because someone asked him to and he didn't start writing because he was asked to do so. He did both because he wanted to. He will continue to do both not to please anyone other than himself.



Chapter Nine: At Lest He Never Walked

Chapter Nine: At Lest He Never Walked Summary and Analysis

October 1, 2006 - Murakami City, Niigata Prefecture

Haruki is preparing to swim 0.93 miles, ride a bike for 24.8 miles and run 6.2 miles. The weather couldn't be better for conditioning. He is preparing to begin the swimming portion of the Murakami City Triathlon. It will be the fourth time that he's entered the competition although he never had qualified. As he looks at the Japan Sea, that toxin within him emerges. The sea looks calm but perhaps there is a school of poisonous jellyfish awaiting him. For some reason, he seems to always blow the swimming portion of triathlons. He was brutally kicked in the first triathlon he was in. Perhaps that incident has stayed in the back of his mind. But he was never an expert swimmer and had never been taught the correct techniques as a youngster even for the fundamental crawl. Even hiring coaches really didn't help; in fact, the coaches messed up the technique and form he did have.

Finally, Haruki's wife found a coach who understood how to train someone who had long-ago acquired bad habits. Her approach wasn't slash and burn; rather, she approached one technique at a time. By the time he had completed a training program with her, Haruki felt he had improved his style and was able to swim longer distances more efficiently.

In 2004, after four years away, Haruki entered the Murakami Triathlon. His timing wasn't spectacular but he was able to finish the competition. In October 2006, he was preparing to begin the swimming phase of the triathlon. Haruki noticed participants that had been in other Murakami Triathlons. The Murakami Triathlon is a rather small competition in that it has only three to four hundred entrants. It is low-key and has a non-threatening local appeal.

When the siren sounds, everyone plunges into the water and begins with the crawl. He doesn't panic even though the space is crowded and he is kicked several times. After finishing that phase, the entrants come back ashore and run to where the bikes are parked. The transition from swimming to cycling is not smooth. He keeps up but many bikers pass him. One benefit is that the bike path travels along the scenic Sasgawa Nagare seacoast. Haruki finishes faster than he expected and is ready to start the last leg of the triathlon, the running. His legs are tight for the first two miles but straighten out and he is able to complete the triathlon. Most important of all, he enjoyed himself.

Long-distance running molded Haruki into the person he is. He has no plans stop running as long as his body cooperates. He'll always be looking for the next marathon or the next triathlon. He runs to learn and he runs to try to reach a place of contentment.



Characters

Haruki Murakami

Haruki Murakami is a professional writer and an amateur runner. He was born and raised in Japan but spent many years in Hawaii and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a professor and lecturer at Harvard University. He was the type of kid who would most likely be found in his room alone reading a book instead of outside playing with other kids. That trend continued into his adulthood. Since he was not indoctrinated into team sports as a young boy, he had a tendency to pursue a sport that he could do alone. His life experiences and personality made him the perfect candidate for running.

As a young man, he loved jazz and opened a club just outside Tokyo. By the time he was thirty, he was successful enough to hire others to run his club which left the young man with a lot of time on his hands. He answered a nagging within him to condition his body, something he had virtually ignored for years. Running was a natural pursuit for him and he began slowly but eventually developed quite a daily regimen for himself. A personal best for him was running sixty-three miles in one day! Around the same time he took up running, it occurred to Murakami that he would like to write - write stories that others would enjoy reading and that he would enjoy writing.

Throughout his life, Murakami dedicated himself to writing and to running. He felt that he would not have been successful in one without the other. The dedication he learned from running he applied to writing and the focus he learned from writing he applied to running.

Mrs. Haruki Murakami

Haruki Murakami was a very private and reserved young man. He came out of his shell a bit when he met his future wife. He married young and was forced to become a little more social. Haruki was a music lover and especially loved jazz. He opened a jazz club up in a suburb of Tokyo. Mrs. Murakami was a great help to him in getting the business off the ground and helped him run it. By the time Murakami was thirty, with the constant support of his wife, the club had become a huge success. He was able to hire others to run the day-to-day operation of the club. After a while, he thought it was time for his life to go into a very different direction.

Murakami discussed their future with his wife. He wanted to sell the club and take his chances with a writing career. And, he felt the need to begin a conditioning regimen to improve his body and mind. Mrs. Murakami was completely supportive of his suggestions and agreed to sell the club. She had every confidence that Murakami would be a success.

Murakami began slowly but eventually ran most every day and kept increasing his distance and endurance. His wife also supported him in his running regimen by making



snacks that would give him the energy to keep up his running schedule. Mrs. Murakami did not learn how to swim as a youngster. She hired a coach who was able to teach her to swim. When Murakami got into triathlons, one of the legs was swimming. Mrs. Murakami recommended her coach to him who was able to improve his swimming techniques and break some old habits that were holding him back in the competitions.

Swimming Coach

When Murakami was having a difficult time with his swimming for triathlons, his wife recommended a female swimming coach that she used. This coach was able to improve his techniques so that he could more effectively compete in the races.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Murakami took on the challenge of translating the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald from English to Japanese.

Franz Kafka

Haruki Murakami was the recipient of the Franz Kafka Prize in literature.

Book Publisher

Murakami's first book was a two-hundred page manuscript that he wrote by hand. He shipped it off to a publisher without having a copy of it. Fortunately, the book, "Hear the Wind Sing" came to his book publisher's notice and it was ultimately published.

Mick Jagger

Mick Jagger once said that he would never be singing "Satisfaction" at age 45. However, he apparently changed his mind because he was singing it at his sixties.

Ernest Hemingway

Murakami modeled his writing regimen after Ernest Hemingway, who would stop writing when he knew he could still do more.

Shakespeare, Balzac and Dickens

As writers advance in age, their talents generally diminish. However, there are exceptional writers who never lose their genius; for example, Shakespeare, Balzac and Dickens.

Dostoyevsky

Dostoyevsky wrote two of his best novels, "The Possessed" and "The Brothers Karamazov," when he was in his sixties.



Objects/Places

Japan

Haruki Murakami was born and raised in Japan. Although he lived in the United States for different periods of time, Japan was his permanent home.

Jazz Club

As a young man, Haruki Murakami was a music lover and especially enjoyed jazz. He and his wife opened up a jazz club in a suburb of Tokyo that became quite a success.

Kauai, Hawaii

Although Haruki Murakami was born in Japan, he lived for a time in Kauai, Hawaii. He was a runner and swimmer and enjoyed the pleasant weather on the islands when carrying out his conditioning and exercise routines.

New York City Marathon

Haruki Murakami conditioned himself for the New York City Marathon that was held in November. He entered the marathon four times during his running years.

Athens Marathon

Haruki Murakami was hired by travel magazine to cover the Athens Marathon and write an article about it. He ran the 26-mile marathon backwards, front finish to start, early in the morning to avoid the traffic and heat.

Kanagawa Prefecture

Haruki Murakami and his wife lived in the Kanagawa Prefecture which was outside Tokyo where his studio was. He had devised a running path in his neighborhood that included slopes and hills that would challenge him.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Haruki Murakami lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for a period while he was a professor and lecturer at Harvard University.



MIT

Haruki Murakami was recruited by MIT to give a lecture to a student assembly. He was nervous and would practice while he ran. He was not fluent in English and had to choose words for his lecture that weren't difficult for him to pronounce.

Lake Saroma, Hokkaido

Haruki Murakami participated in an ultra-marathon that took place every year at Lake Saroma, in Hokkaido, Japan.

Chiba Prefecture

Murakami took part in a marathon in the Chiba Prefecture in Japan. It was one of the worst experiences he ever had in a marathon. His legs cramped at 18 miles into the 26-mile race, and never recovered and he had to walk the rest of the way.



Themes

Mind and Body

One of the main themes that emerges from "What I Talk About When I Talk About Running" is the importance of a balance between mind and body in all of one's pursuits. Murakami describes how his running conditioned him not only to take on the challenges of marathons and triathlons, it conditioned him to face the monumental task of beginning to write a new novel.

The conditioning gave him the ability to have a clear mind and an ability to focus on milestones and ultimately on the finish line. In writing, the finish line was the publisher's deadline. In running, of course, it was literally the finish line. But in both pursuits, Murakami stressed that his goal was about winning for himself - not for someone else. His biggest and life-long competitor was Murakami himself.

As a young boy, Murakami preferred to read alone in his room. In a way, it was his first conditioning toward running and writing. Running and writing have many similarities. They both take conditioning, dedication, focus and the ability to get past "bumps in the road," cramping muscles on a run and writer's block on an empty sheet of paper.

Murakami presents a strong case that without the conditioning of his mind and body, he would not have had the success he enjoyed in both fields. Just like everyone, Murakami had setbacks and disappointments but he had learned to keep his natural inclination toward the negative at bay. And learned to do so from running and from writing. He was able to learn from both of his pursuits and aptly apply them in a positive way of the other.

Personal Best

Haruki Murakami is a professional writer and award-winning author. He has been an amateur runner for thirty years, taking up the sport around the same time he decided he wanted to write. Murakami was an only child who spent many hours alone, reading in his room, while other kids played outside. With no siblings to teach him and his natural aversion to team sports, Murakami was attracted to running at a point in life when he decided he needed an exercise regimen. It was a perfect sport for a person who liked to be alone and didn't have the need to please or impress others.

Murakami always did his best in the marathons and triathlons he entered. He never felt he was a failure by not coming in first. He did not feel he was competing with the other runners; rather, he was competing with his own past performances. To Murakami, doing his personal best and besting his last best time was a success. He ran every day conditioning himself for his runs. He ran alone and listened to music. To him, running was a personal experience.



Murakami took this same philosophy to his writing. He did not write to be a renowned writer who sold a lot of books. What was important to him was that people liked to read what he wrote and that he enjoyed writing it. Murakami felt he had a responsibility to himself and to his readers to write from the heart, not with a goal of writing a bestseller or winning awards. Through the years, Murakami felt with each book he wrote, his writing improved. He didn't measure it against anyone else's writing - he only measured his progress against what he had written in the past himself.

Either running or writing, Haruki Murakami had always strived to do his personal best.

Dedication

Haruki Murakami chose two major pursuits in his life that both require an extraordinary amount of dedication. At thirty years of age, Murakami was a successful businessman and had the luxury of time on his hands. In his idleness internal triggers were set off that spoke to Murakami. He felt a compelling need to begin conditioning his body, something that he had neglected for years. At around the same time, it occurred to him that he would like to write stories that people might enjoy reading. Both pursuits, if taken seriously, were challenging and both would require maximum dedication.

It might have seemed wiser to take on one of these challenges first and after getting it to a manageable place, then take on the second one. Why would Murakami want to take them on at the same time? Wouldn't that add undue stress and increase the potential of failing at both?

But Murakami's instincts were right. One of his pursuits, the running and physical conditioning, focused on the physical functioning of the body. The other challenge, that of writing, was an intellectual pursuit. What Murakami did was take the endurance he learned in running and applied it to his writing. He learned to be focused and disciplined in his writing in order to have success and achieve his goals. He took that discipline to his conditioning regimen. Murakami learned to have a balance between these two major pursuits and just like the body needs both heart and brain to function, his challenges needed the strength of both as well along with the power of learned dedication.



Style

Perspective

"What I Talk About When I Talk About Running" is a memoir by Haruki Murakami and is written in the first person. Murakami tells his very personal story about life-long commitments to both running and writing. Murakami is a professional writer and award-winning author. He is an amateur runner but took his conditioning as seriously as he did his writing. It is a personal story of a near obsession with running and physical conditioning, always aiming to achieve his personal best. His character is strengthened with each race he runs and with each book he writes. He learns dedication and commitment in his running and applies those skills to his writing. He learns focus and discipline in his writing and applies those attributes to his running. The skills and characteristics he learns in one pursuit helps him in the other.

Haruki Murakami is a native of Japan. He is a renowned writer whose work has been translated into forty-two languages. He has had many honors including the Franz Kafka Prize. He also worked as a professor and lecturer at American colleges including Harvard and MIT. His books include: "After Dark"; "After the Quake"; "Blind Willow"; "Sleeping Woman"; and, "The Elephant Vanishes" among many other works.

Murakami's love of both running and writing shines through in this memoir. Murakami ends the story with the hope that his gravestone is carved with: "Haruki Murakami, Writer and Runner, At Least He Never Walked."

Tone

"What I Talk About When I Talk About Running" is a memoir by Haruki Murakami and is written in a straightforward manner and with great sincerity. Murakami is by his own description a very private person. When he was younger, he felt he was socially inept and enjoyed being alone. He married young and had to force himself to be more social. Yet, that need to be isolated has remained with him over the years. It is remarkable that such a private person as Murakami decided to write a book about himself and his very deep personal feelings about life and what he personally needed to be successful in both his avocation of running and in his professional career as a writer and author.

Having a rigorous conditioning regimen was a very important thing for Murakami. He had kept up a demanding running and exercise routine for thirty years. He had also been a writer for about the same time. He tells the readers how important it was for him to condition his mind and body. He told of his disappointments and his doubts along the way. Murakami revealed how he had to keep the toxin within him at bay. The toxin he wrote about was the internal self-doubt that taunted him with the possibility that wouldn't be successful or that he couldn't do what he set out to do.



Being such a very private man and writing such personal issues had to be somewhat difficult for him. But he felt a need to express himself. An individual who is so buttoned up can benefit from revealing his inner most thoughts and beliefs. Even though Murakami is a very private person, he felt that sharing his experiences in conditioning mind and body could help others who might read his words and become inspired by them.

Structure

"What I Talk About When I Talk About Running" is a memoir by Haruki Murakami. He is a professional writer and an amateur runner. The book is separated into nine chapters and is structured in a random fashion and is not presented in a chronological order. Each chapter is subtitled with a date and location that pertains to that particular chapter. However, within each chapter, Murakami makes many references to other times and places. It is obvious that Murakami's aim was not present a story in a narrative form about his life. Rather, his goal was to explain himself and his near obsession with running and how it impacted his life and career.

Preceding the first chapter is a foreword entitled, "Suffering Is Optional," which explains what compelled him to write this book. He felt the need to write honestly about what running has meant to him and do so in his own style. He stressed that his book was not intended to be a "fitness" or "health" book but rather a description of how he believed the mind and the body worked in sync whether it was for a physical pursuit like running or for an intellectual pursuit like writing.

In an afterword entitled, "Roads All Round the World," Murakami further explains his passion for writing this book and how it was different from all his other works because it was about himself. He also makes acknowledgments to those who contributed to his work including the many runners he's met along the way.



Quotes

"It's unbelievably clear and sunny, not a cloud in the sky. As if the concept clouds doesn't even exist." (Chapter One, page 3)

"I'm the kind of person who likes to be by himself. To put a finer point on it, I'm the type of person who doesn't find it painful to be alone." (Chapter One, page 15)

"Writers who are blessed with inborn talent can freely write novels no matter what they do—or don't do. Like water from a natural spring, the sentences just well up, and with little or no effort these writers can complete a work." (Chapter Two, page 43)

"When people pass away, do their thoughts just vanish?" (Chapter Four, page 76)

"No matter how much enthusiasm and effort you put into writing, if you totally lack literary talent you can forget about being a novelist." (Chapter Four, page 76)

"I'm not a human. I'm a piece of machinery. I don't need to feel a thing. Just forge on ahead." (Chapter Six, page 110)

"Has the dark shadow really disappeared? Or is it inside me, concealed, waiting for its chance to reappear? Like a clever thief hidden inside a house, breathing quietly, waiting until everyone's asleep." (Chapter Seven, page 133)

"At certain points in our lives, when we really need a clear-cut solution, the person who knocks at our door is, more likely than not a messenger bearing bad news." (Chapter Eight, page 144)

"I didn't start running because somebody asked me to become a runner. Just like I didn't become a novelist because someone asked me to. One day, out of the blue, I wanted to write a novel. And one day, out of the blue, I started to run—simply because I wanted to." (Chapter Eight, page 150)

"The sad spreadsheet of my life that reveals how much my debts far outweigh my assets." (Chapter Nine, page 152)

"Long-distance running (more or less, for better or worse) has molded me into the person I am today, and I'm hoping it will remain part of my life for as long as possible. I'll be happy if running and I can grow old together." (Chapter Nine, page 172)

"And I hope that, over time, as one race follows another, in the end I'll reach a place I'm content with. Or maybe just catch a glimpse of it." (Chapter Nine, page 172)

Topics for Discussion

How does Haruki Murakami equate running with writing?

What was the longest number of miles that Haruki ran in one day? Why did he take that challenge on?

What is the typical number of miles in a marathon? What cities did Haruki run marathons in?

What is a triathlon? How did Haruki prepare for competing in a triathlon?

What did Haruki mean when he referred to the "toxin" within?

What are the three elements that make for a good writer? Why is it necessary for a writer to be disciplined?

Why did Haruki need to be in good physical shape when he began a new writing project?