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THE REMAINS OF THE DAY

By Kazuo Ishiguro

Alfred A. Knopf

How many layers of propriety and duty can a man wrap his humanity in before he loses all touch with the personhood underneath? *The Remains of the Day*, named on Oct. 26 as the winner of the Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize, brilliantly addresses that question.

Speaking in clipped restraint through an upper lip so stiff you wonder how he flosses, Stevens the butler, ironic narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's tour de force novel, sounds at first a bit like Dr. Watson. And like Sherlock Holmes' staid partner, Stevens sees just dimly the human community that moves beyond his narrow sphere. Yet, from the beginning, a moving narrative trickles past his starch and shirt stays, and before long pours over us with poignant force. By the end, it has encapsulated a life and shed abundant light on an entire culture.

Stevens has spent his life serving Lord Darlington, master of Darlington Hall. The nobleman now dead, Darlington Hall has come under the ownership of an American businessman named Farraday who plans to reduce the servant staff. Farraday gives Stevens a week's holiday of an auto trip from Oxfordshire through the West Country to Cornwall. This six-day excursion in July 1956 and the meditations it allows Stevens on his past, present and future form the outline of the story.

Stevens heads toward Cornwall ostensibly to invite Darlington Hall's amiable former housekeeper, Miss Kenton, to return. Like Stevens, she had been a fixture there until leaving in middle age to marry. Now, however, Stevens detects wistfulness in her letters and a possible wish to come back.

Stevens is so humorlessly cemented in his posture of stereotypical decorum that his observations seem ironically funny. He begins his trip, in fact, vexed by his new employer's fondness for "bantering," occasional lighthearted comments which he believes convey affection but for which he has developed no skill. Stevens designs exercises to help him learn the art of witty reply, approaching the chore of light conversation the way another might approach towing a truck from a ditch.

Through the surface humor, however, we see that the values which became Stevens' lifelong obsession have robbed him of any opportunity to live a happy or meaningful life.

The all-consuming goal of his life has been to achieve "greatness" as a butler. The essential element of greatness he feels is best described as "dignity" which "has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits. . . . The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and

inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze."

He believes he first "came of age" as a butler in March 1923 when Darlington Hall became the site of an important international conference while Stevens' father, a former butler, lay dying of a stroke upstairs. As Lord Darlington conferred with European statesmen about how a defeated Germany should be treated, Stevens was summoned to his father's deathbed. The dying man reaches out, gasping, "I'm proud of you. A good son. I hope I've been a good father to you." Stevens, convinced that he can do them both best honor by showing he has learned that butlers are most noble when "devoting our attention to providing the best possible service to those great gentlemen in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies," offers as his final words to his father, "I'm afraid we're extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning."

It is her own "exemplary professionalism" that prompts Stevens to hope Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn) will return. Yet professionalism was the least she had offered him during their decades serving together in Darlington Hall. When she first arrived as a young woman, she offered him color and beauty and light. To his annoyance, she brought a vase of flowers to his room because "it seemed such a pity your room should be so dark and cold, Mr. Stevens, when it's such bright sunshine outside." His response was as dark and cold as his room: "Miss Kenton, I appreciate your kindness. But this is not a room of entertainment. I am happy to have distractions kept to a minimum."

For nearly two decades Miss Kenton's overtures of warmth and her attempts to reach flesh and blood beneath Stevens' professional armor were met with the same consistently inviolable punctiliousness. Finally, she took her escape into marriage with a man she eventually learned to love. Only too late, at the dusk of Stevens' life, does he learn it was himself Miss Kenton had thought all along of marrying.

Stevens has only one consolation for missing his chances to reach peace with his father and find love with Miss Kenton. He has given a lifetime of loyal service to Lord Darlington. Therein lies the cruelest twist of all.

He begins his auto trip denying the "utter nonsense" being spoken about Darlington "these days." Confidently, Stevens announces, "I can declare that he was a truly good man at heart, a gentleman through and through, and one I am today proud to have given my best years of service to."

But six days of solitary reflection make the truth about his lord plain to Stevens. Whatever the British nobility and sportsmanship in his original motive of treating a defeated enemy gently, during the years of Hitler's rise Lord Darlington had become more and more a dupe for the Nazis, at one point dismissing two housemaids because they were Jewish and subjecting Stevens to a humiliating public interview to demonstrate that ordinary citizens are unfit to voice opinion on political issues. "Democracy," he had

come to feel, "is something for a bygone era." At the time, Stevens remained devoted, convinced a great butler's role requires him to believe, "'This employer embodies all that I find noble and admirable. I will hereafter devote myself to serving him.' This is loyalty *intelligently* bestowed. What is there 'undignified' in this?"

As his journey nears its end, however, he senses he has built his life on a foundation of moral quicksand: "Lord Darlington . . . wasn't a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. . . . As for myself, I cannot even claim that. . . . All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really—one has to ask oneself—what dignity is there in that?"

So, as dusk encroaches, Stevens suspects he has let life's gifts slip away while he neatly and dutifully folded the wrapping paper. A life of service honestly if misguidedly rendered is all he has to comfort the slender remains of his day.

The Nagasaki-born Englishman Ishiguro in his consummately masterful third novel has taken one narrow figure and used him to reveal a way of life long implanted on his adopted nation's soul. One of the many sources of this book's genius is how Ishiguro uses so small a window to cast so much light on an entire society.