

Ishiguro's Middle Ages

By MICHELLE KARNES

Review of *THE BURIED GIANT*, by Kazuo Ishiguro

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Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel, *The Buried Giant*, is about a couple's quest to find their son and a warrior's quest to slay a dragon. But this is not a standard adventure novel. The dragon, Querig, is old and feeble, hardly the fire-breathing enemy you might expect. In her final days, all she wants is a little beauty to contemplate. She is no scapegoat, no externalized enemy without whom humankind flourishes. In the manner of medieval beasts, she is a composite creature with unmatched parts. Her skin is reptilian in texture but fish-like in color. She has wings like a bird and eyes like a turtle's. The anthropologist Mary Douglas explains better than anyone the particular power of anything, fantastic beasts included, that offends our sense of order. Crossing species boundaries, medieval beasts symbolize disruption, and for that reason pose a threat to people who need the illusion of control. But Ishiguro refuses to let Querig take the blame for society's ills. Far from introducing chaos, she is a conservative force, preserving a status quo barbarically established by King Arthur. The problems in Ishiguro's world rest not with her but with its human inhabitants.

The novel is set in the immediate aftermath of King Arthur's reign, probably in the sixth century, though it's always tricky to date events concerning King Arthur since he didn't exist. The real historical background is this: England was the northernmost possession of the Roman Empire, but when the Western Roman Empire was under attack by the Visigoths, to whom it eventually fell in 410 AD, Romans withdrew from the island and created a power vacuum. Various foreign powers sought to take advantage of the situation. The most potent, and eventually successful, of them were Germanic invaders, above all the Saxons. Ishiguro sets his novel in a period of relative peace, after the initial Germanic conquest, when Saxons lived alongside the native Celtic inhabitants of England, the Britons. The virtue of Arthur is that he was supposed to have kept the Saxons and their allied forces at bay during his lifetime, but with his death the British defenses crumbled. *The Buried Giant* inhabits the final moments of peace and explains the return to war. We know—from history and from the novel—that the Saxons will win. Although Arthurian literature is built on nostalgia and the mourning of past greatness, Ishiguro's attitude is not weepy. His Britons deserve what's coming.

In this and other ways, Ishiguro's novel is expressly unidealistic, a startling feature given the novel's appeal to Arthurian literature, a genre that is idealistic to the extreme. Honorable knights fight to the death for damsels in distress, they aspire to impossible perfection, and they are unfailingly earnest and uncynical. In Ishiguro's novel, we find an aged Sir Gawain, famed knight of the roundtable, but he's not a hero in any meaningful sense. Prone to self-justification and moral rationalization, he confuses the boundary between good and evil. Families are ruptured and people are dishonest. Guests are not honored but mistrusted. Monks are ascetic but most are not spiritual, and their methods are cruel. Love does not conquer all, and it is painfully helpless before death. We see people falling well short of the standards they set for themselves, suffering the present that they have created.

Ishiguro draws on medieval romance with the purpose of reimagining it, and he is faithful to the genre when he does so. Romance lends itself to artful revision, which is why it has survived for centuries. No genre of medieval literature has proven more durable. Its basic features—knights, supernatural foes, love that must be proven to show it is genuine—are easily recognizable and therefore easily repurposed. In *The Buried Giant*, our warrior pursues a dragon, but not to prove his worth or win the love of a woman. Querig's death is not heroic because she is not the enemy. Human treachery and betrayal are far more threatening than decidedly killable beasts.

In his magnum opus, *The Secular Age*, the philosopher Charles Taylor famously described the medieval period as an enchanted age, but that's not its purpose for Ishiguro. Sure, the characters fear ogres, pixies, and dragons, but such creatures are not figments of imagination or symptoms of too-ready belief. For Taylor, medieval people confuse beliefs for facts, but for Ishiguro, belief and fact are more often in league

than not. Monsters inspire worry because they exist. Ishiguro brings in classical mythology as well: a Charon figure takes characters across the river Styx, and a monk is a modern Prometheus, betraying the God he should serve. Mythology is real too. Belief in monsters and myths is no more naïve—and is far less dangerous—than belief in the inalienable virtue of the Britons.

Ishiguro turns to the Middle Ages, then, not to ponder its simplicity but to contemplate memory and loss, the novel's key themes. *The Buried Giant* describes people unable to remember the past even as they represent it. It calls attention to time through characters who live in the past but inhabit an eternal present. The memory of the characters, of their culture, and of the readers who look back to a fictive past—"our country," as Ishiguro repeatedly calls it—are all interrelated. In each respect, memory is selective, necessary, and haunting. Memories are unreliable and often painful but personal relationships can't be forged without them. Memory that is deliberately suppressed, whether by the Britons generally or by our two main characters, preserves less than it destroys. Parents forget their children and knights forget their orders. The novel's monastery used to be a hillfort, and though unrecognized by most, the building's past seeps into its present. Roman monuments and roads are fixtures in the text, showing that the past cannot be occluded. We walk paths and live in buildings that were made for people in times gone by. Our world does not belong only to us.

The reader is placed in much the same position as the characters themselves, trying to figure out what happened in their personal lives or in the recent past of the country with only snippets of information. It becomes clear that much of what is forgotten is traumatic. The official version of the war and the fragile peace between the Britons and Saxons starts to fall apart, and we are led to distrust the stories that people like to tell themselves about their past honor and fidelity. It is tempting to relegate horrendous deeds to the past, to bury them and therefore sanitize the present. We do it whenever we call ISIS or some terrorist organization medieval. It's more comfortable to forget the fact that the twentieth century is the most violent on record and to believe that the worst atrocities belong to long past civilizations. We renounce ISIS and assign it to the past so that we can feel better about the present. But such comforts are hollow. And yet, in *The Buried Giant*, memory restored makes nothing better. No longer required to forget, many of the characters instead choose to do so.

Memory and loss are themes that have long enthralled Ishiguro, and *The Buried Giant* explores them in compelling and sophisticated ways. Even if the past were not so often simplified and distorted in literature and movies, Ishiguro's exploration of its complicated relationship to the present would deserve praise. When we look at the present without reference to what came before, we deceive ourselves, and that is as true for Ishiguro's characters as it is for us. What comes across as naïve in *The Buried Giant* is not the past but the presentist bias, the belief that all that really matters is what happens in our own lifetimes. There are criticisms to be made about the novel, but the successes are more remarkable. Ishiguro takes a great risk when he merges medieval romance with the modern novel, and it is all the more striking that he succeeds. *The Buried Giant* is thoughtful and smart but also engaging and addictive. I look forward to teaching it in my next course on romance.

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