

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running

A MEMOIR BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

It's probably my own dumb fault for expecting Murakami's running memoir to be something it isn't. In that Murakami is a renowned Japanese novelist (author of books such as *After Dark* and *Sputnik Sweetheart* and winner of the Franz Kafka Prize--my friends know my affection for Kafka), my supposition was that he would use his fiction skills to caress the language as a novelist is wont to do to produce profound insights in wonderful ways, the way old Doc Sheehan (running's philosopher/guru) used to do. He doesn't.

"Whenever I feel like I don't want to run," he writes, "I always ask myself the same thing: *You're able to make a living as a novelist, working at home, setting your own hours, so you don't have to commute on a packed train or sit through boring meetings. Don't you realize how fortunate you are?* (Believe me, I do.) *Compared to that, running an hour around the neighborhood is nothing, right?* Whenever I picture packed trains and endless meetings, this gets me motivated all over again and I lace up my running shoes and set off without any qualms." [Italics are his.]

"Oh, I've forgotten about myself, the most important person; well, I'm standing here in front of the table. The Inspector is lounging at his ease with his legs crossed, his arm hanging over the back of the chair like this, an absolute boor." That's Kafka, from *Fraulein Burstner*.

"But races also bring tension. In those minutes before the start, I feel threatened. I know I may be beaten. I know I will surely feel pain. And not only my mind knows this, my entire body knows it and acts accordingly. Hence, the belch. That is the way I react when I am in a situation where I am embarrassed, frustrated or apprehensive. The belch is something rarely uttered in anger. It is not the roar of a lion, but the bleat of a sheep." That's old Doc Sheehan (*Dr. Sheehan on Running*).

I wish there was more writing like that in Murakami's running memoir. There isn't. What there is is a lot of stuff you would find in the journal-writing of an average runner who notes what he has run, where he ran, what he was thinking about, how he shoe-horned it in around the other things going on that day, much

of the other things noted.

“So anyway,” Murakami writes, “my muscles right now are really tight, and stretching doesn’t loosen them up. I’m peaking in terms of training, but even so they’re tighter than usual. Sometimes I have to hit my legs with a fist when they get right to loosen them up. (Yes it hurts.)”

Not exactly Yukio Mishima, perhaps Japan’s best novelist of the modern age, dead by hara-kiri in 1970. He would have never admitted that it hurt, because he would not have allowed it to hurt. “Beauty, beautiful things, those are now my most deadly enemies,” he once wrote. Think about that.