

Sir Kazuo Ishiguro warns of young authors self-censoring out of 'fear'

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Young authors may be self-censoring because they worry they will be "trolled" or "cancelled", according to celebrated writer Sir Kazuo Ishiguro.

Sir Kazuo, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017, warned that a "climate of fear" was preventing some people from writing what they want.

He said they may be concerned that an "anonymous lynch mob will turn up online and make their lives a misery".

He told the BBC: "I very much fear for the younger generation of writers."

The 66-year-old said he was worried that less established authors were self-censoring by avoiding writing from certain viewpoints or including characters outside their immediate experiences.

"I think that is a dangerous state of affairs," added the acclaimed author, whose works include *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*.

He said he was particularly troubled about young writers "who rightly perhaps feel that their careers are more fragile, their reputations are more fragile and they don't want to take risks".

His comments come after a number of freedom of speech disputes, with writers being "cancelled" or facing threats to boycott their work. High-profile targets have included JK Rowling, Julie Burchill and Jeanine Cummins.

Sir Kazuo, however, who received a knighthood in 2019, said he was not worried about being "cancelled".

"I think I'm in a privileged and relatively protected position because I'm a very established author," he said. "I'm the age I am. I have a reputation. Perhaps it's an illusion but I think I'm protected."

In a career spanning four decades, he has written eight novels and one book of short stories, combining critical acclaim with commercial success.

The Remains of the Day won the Booker Prize in 1989 and was turned into a film starring Sir Anthony Hopkins and Dame Emma Thompson. It was nominated for eight Oscars.

Never Let Me Go, his dystopian drama about human clones whose organs are harvested for transplant, was also adapted for the big screen, featuring Keira Knightley, Carey Mulligan and Andrew Garfield.

And the author, who was born in Nagasaki, Japan, but moved to England when he was five, insisted there was no subject or viewpoint he would "shrink back from".

"Novelists should feel free to write from whichever viewpoint they wish or represent all kinds of views," he said.

"Right from an early age I've written from the point of view of people very different from myself. My first novel was written from the point of view of a woman."

A Pale View of Hills, which tells the story of a Japanese woman trying to deal with the suicide of her daughter, made an immediate impact when it was published in 1982.

'A more open discussion'

"I think there are very valid parts of this argument about appropriation of voice," he added, saying he believes "we do have the obligation to teach ourselves and to do research and to treat people with respect if we're going to have them feature in our work".

He said there must be "decency towards people outside of one's own immediate experience".

But he said: "If I shrink back from something it's because I would doubt my ability to be able to learn enough about it, to write fairly about it. But, you know, I tend to be quite arrogant about my ability to learn about things, if I put my mind to it."

He has called for "a more open discussion" about cancel culture and freedom of speech.

His new novel Klara and the Sun is published on Tuesday. It tells the story of a solar-powered robot that looks, behaves and moves like a human and becomes an artificial friend to a teenage girl.

'Optimistic' about AI

Set in an unspecified future, robots are as common as bicycles, and gene editing is the norm.

"It's not so much of a fantasy," said Sir Kazuo. "I didn't really imagine anything.

"I haven't written one of those stories about some treacherous, sinister robot that take over the family and then all her mates take over the world. It's not one of those stories at all."

He said he was "quite sunny and optimistic" that artificial intelligence, or AI, "will bring enormous benefits". Nonetheless, he said he does have some reservations.

"I think the point when an AI programme... can write a novel that can make me cry, that shows that we've crossed some kind of remarkable line because it shows that AI can understand human emotions and it has the capacity for empathy.

"And when it can do that, it means that it can run political campaigns, for instance, very, very powerfully, much more effectively than the various kinds of data-based tactics have done so far.

"And in fact AI could come up with the next big idea, an idea like communism or Nazism or capitalism... and what troubles me about that is that it is very difficult for humans to keep control of that situation."

At that point, Sir Kazuo Ishiguro said, he would be out of a job, replaced by a robot. But "there'll be much bigger things to worry about" by then.