

**UNDERGROUND: THE TOKYO GAS  
ATTACK AND THE JAPANESE PSYCHE BY  
HARUKI MURAKAMI**



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From Publishers Weekly

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From Library Journal

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The true story behind an act of terrorism that turned an average Monday morning into a national disaster. In spite of the perpetrators' intentions, the Tokyo gas attack left only twelve people dead, but thousands were injured and many suffered serious after-effects. The novelist Haruki Murakami interviews the victims to try and establish precisely what happened on the subway that day. He also interviews members and ex-members of the doomsday cult responsible, in the hope that they might be able to explain the reason for the attack and how it was that their guru instilled such devotion in his followers.

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Most helpful customer reviews

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating Modern History and Look into the Mind of Murakami

By queenhobart

I read this because I love Murakami. I had never heard of the Tokyo gas attacks, and now am frankly pretty surprised it had never come up in the US.

Anyhow, Murakami mostly stays out of his subjects' ways in the first portion of the book. He lets survivors speak for themselves and neither he nor the translator make many intrusions, unless it's to clarify some detail (usually the translator notes are for people like me who don't have any background knowledge about the attacks).

It's really interesting to see how people viewed the same situation differently--there are several times when one survivor will describe a person that later tells their own story of the event, and both are pretty different. Despite this being a really cool perspective, it can get a tiny bit repetitive, but it's worth it to stick it out and

finish the book.

The last section of the book is Murakami's reflections on what the gas attacks meant in the broader context of Japanese society and interviews with ex and current Aum members. During this, he waxes philosophical about his own complex relationship with his home country. As a western fan who has never visited Japan I found this fascinating. It's easy to pick up on themes feeling isolated or like something is wrong in your society (or the way you relate to it) in his other books, but it was very interesting to see him speak directly about these thoughts.

He's more intrusive in the Aum section, which I actually appreciate--his anger at the naive beliefs that led to so many deaths is palpable, and most of his interviewees don't shrink back from it.

Overall, a really good read if you're interested in Japan, terrorism, cults or just Haruki Murakami.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Worth reading and contemplating

By Prossion

First of all, considering who the author is, I should note that interest in Murakami's (wondrous) novels is not going to necessarily go to equal interest in this book. While some of the persistent themes of Murakami's novels are present - alienation, yearning, etc. - this book is less about Murakami and more about Japanese post-war society. In analyzing the Aum and Shoko Asahara phenomenon (particularly the March 20 1995 Sarin gas attacks), Murakami hopes to delve deeper into the underlying circumstances.

Part 1 of the book - the titular "Underground" - consists of Murakami's interviews with approximately 40 victims/survivors (as one self-described survivor notes in one of the interviews, victimization is a self-defeating subject). These interviews tend to last anywhere between two and five pages, and admittedly, they can be a little monotonous. But I think that's the point. Some have complained about how "boring" it is, but each of those interviewed add a little more substance to the reader's conception of the Japanese psyche. I myself was fascinated with every single one of them. Although many of them had similar things to say, each perspective was in one way or another unique...call it individuality in multiplicity, or unity in individuality, whatever.

However, out of all of the interviews, some in particular stick out - both for the reader and for Murakami as well. One of these regards the death of Eiji Wada, an outgoing husband who unfortunately passed away months before the birth of his daughter, Asuka. Murakami interviews not only the late Eiji's wife, but his mother and father. He thus paints a sorrowful picture of a man who lived a kind, wonderful life, before having it senselessly torn away by something as simple as a poke of an umbrella. Even more poignant was the lamentable fate of "Shizuko Akashi" (a pseudonym was used to avoid the media), who became a vegetable as a result of the sarin. Although she is (was) undergoing extensive therapy to regain her faculties of speech and memory, such a tragedy imprints itself on the mind of the reader.

After a section in which Murakami discusses his own perspective on the events, he launches into a series of interviews - less numerous but more extensive (with more editorializing) than those affected by the sarin - with members of Aum (this second part is called "The Place That Was Promised"). Some of these members had left; others remained in the organization. The last 100 pages of the book thus attempt to paint the other side of the picture - to truly see if the Aum novitiates were as sinister and foreign as the media believed them to be.

But I think the truly important message of the book - one that Murakami touches on occasionally - is that one



cannot understand the senseless tragedy that occurred on that day without attempting to understand the perspectives of all involved. The survivors of the attacks are not extraordinary people who have expert opinions - they simply espoused their own beliefs. They just happened to pick the short straws in the jaw, and were thus affected in the train. Many of them noted that they wouldn't have even normally been on the train that day if not for it being the end of the fiscal year, or because of a sudden meeting, or because they were early/late getting out the door, etc.

But because of the distinct ordinariness of those affected, the interviews with the Aum initiates complete the picture. The initiates, it is shown, were not fanatical, militaristic, or really at all violent; they simply felt spiritually impoverished, or foreign to their own land. That's a feeling most of us can sympathize with. More importantly, it's a feeling that many of the survivors mention at one point or another - but fleetingly. The survivors, who we can assume are more at home in society than the initiates, are able to change their jobs, to take time off, to forget themselves in the twilit respite between obligations. Those who fled to Aum were, in large measure, those who could not - who fled into self-absorption and solipsism in search of a rigid, permanent purity.

If we subtract the Buddhist esoterica and other elements peculiar to Japan, it's easy to see that this sort of phenomenon is by no means unique. It is the result of marginalization, and if marginalization is tolerated, or if it is spurred on with a lack of understanding, it reacts and in turn grows. In the end, Aum Shinrikyo, rather than embodying the religious tenets that it based itself around, fell into the old pattern of revolutionary conservatism. Such a thing is happening, in smaller or larger examples, around the world - with or without the religious patina. One of my favorite authors, Herman Hesse, struggled with this similar issue - maintaining one's spiritual dignity without subsuming yourself to the tyranny of the majority. That question, in my opinion, is really the undercurrent of this book.

After "The Place We Were Promised" ends, in an Afterword (Murakami's perspective on the trials and crisis as a whole, the impetus for which was Ikuo Hayashi's - one of the assailants - memoir), Murakami notes that we shouldn't be so staunchly critical of the Aum terrorists because of the fact that their malaise is the result of a social condition that we share. This is perhaps true. I know that I myself could certainly see myself in a similar situation had my life taken a slightly different turn. For that reason, I think it is an important book.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

If it Smells Funny Open a Window

By Jim Muccio

I'm probably a little late to read "Underground", by Haruki Murakami, a verbal narrative of witnesses and victims of the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo Subway system perpetrated by the religious cult, "Aum" (pronounced "Om" ), on 20 March 1995. Here in the US we of course heard about the attacks but I would suggested forgot about them and the Japanese people shortly thereafter as the events of April 19th 1995, in Oklahoma City, soon would fill our consciousness. A year later the Khobar towers would once again shake us in our security. The sarin attacks although widely publicized were not generally considered terrorism but more the lunatic actions of a brainwashed following of a religious cult led by their deranged prophet, Shoko Asahara . Cults and their deranged antics did capture US attention again in 1997 when 38 members of "Heaven's Gate" donned their purple attire and drank cyanide laced vodka. This kind of activity seemed apart from terrorist activity we witnessed against us and we continued along in our, "can't happen here security", much as the Japanese people believed, until the event's in the Fall of 2001 changed everything.

As terrorism crept into our global psyche it's now clear that Asahara was not only engaged in terrorism, as Aum was linked to several murders and a previous sarin attack, he was attempting to bring about or incite the apocalyptic ending of the world as he had preached...radical fundamental religious terrorism. Can it be

defined as anything else?

But back to the book, or I should say books, there are two published under the same cover. The first book is called "Underground", and is an exhaustive attempt by Murakami to interview the survivors of the sarin attacks. To put names and stories behind those the Japanese media simply labeled as victims as they conducted the investigation and prosecution of the Aum cult in the open press. These are the stories that Murakami felt were necessary to memorialize so that Japan would not forget what occurred.

The second book, which was published as "Post-Underground" in Japan but included as a 2nd part to the English translation was called "The Place That Was Promised". This second part contains similar narratives obtained in interviews with Murakami but this time they are of members of the Aum cult.

The first book paints an amazing portrait of what was going on the minds of ordinary citizens who were caught up in the chaos of the sub-way attacks. Not understanding something was wrong, sensing that something was amiss but being too committed to work and routine to literally come up for air. They stayed below ground for too long. Miraculously, but for the certain incompetence of the perpetrators, and albeit slow but concerned individuals in Tokyo, of the estimated 5,500 individuals who came into contact with the poisonous gas and sought treatment, only 12 exposures were fatal and 47 resulted in permanent disabilities.

The second book, which with all due respect to the victims and their families, paints a more pertinent, albeit chilling, picture of how those simply seeking more meaning to their lives can get caught up in a movement that without rational or orthodox foundation can become lethal.

From the first book we learn that coming together faster, when the situation changes from the routine, without panic, can save lives. From the second book we learn the warning signs of those disenfranchised from society who are vulnerable and can be preyed upon by those with a solution, or master plan, from which evil against society can then be waged, using their disciples as pawns in their deranged schemes. Together Murakami's two books present a picture of hope, that all is not lost, and yes passive attitudes could lead us into victimhood on either side, but "There but for the grace of God, go I" has an active side. If you think it smells funny, don't wait for someone else to do it, open the window, literally and figuratively.

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