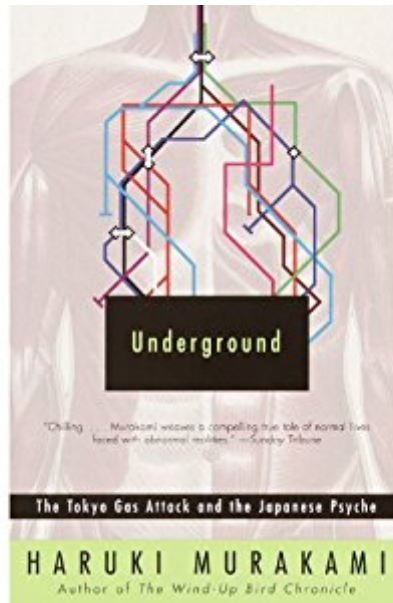


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Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack And The Japanese Psyche



Synopsis

From Haruki Murakami, internationally acclaimed author of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Norwegian Wood*, a work of literary journalism that is as fascinating as it is necessary, as provocative as it is profound. In March of 1995, agents of a Japanese religious cult attacked the Tokyo subway system with sarin, a gas 26 times as deadly as cyanide. Attempting to discover why, Murakami conducted hundreds of interviews with the people involved, from the survivors to the perpetrators to the relatives of those who died, and *Underground* is their story in their own voices. Concerned with the fundamental issues that led to the attack as well as these personal accounts, *Underground* is a document of what happened in Tokyo as well as a warning of what could happen anywhere. This is an enthralling and unique work of nonfiction that is timely and vital and as wonderfully executed as Murakami's brilliant novels.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Underground" is a strange animal. Murakami is known for his fiction, which is the stuff of seemingly straightforward stories interlaced with strange jaunts into the supernatural, the surreal and the just plain odd. From the historical and subterranean epic of *"Wind Up Bird Chronicles"* to the science fiction netherworld of *"Hard Boiled Wonderland"* to the intertwined, haunted love stories of *"Wild Sheep Chase"* and *"Dance Dance Dance"* to the seemingly straightforward *"Norwegian Wood"* and *"South of the Border"*, Murakami has staked out a territory all his own, and erected an aura of genius that no one can penetrate. So, from out of the blue, he turns from fiction and gives us this

document of the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack and does it in such a way that it all but confirms his place as one of the most valuable writers working today. "Underground" documents the coordinated efforts of members of the Aum cult to release Sarin gas on several subway trains in the midst of rush hour. Murakami takes what seems to be a roundabout approach and turns it into the very heart of the matter. Instead of clinically documenting each cult member's actions and the statistics of how many wounded and how many dead in a linear, start-to-finish timeline, Murakami tracks down those who were affected, from the relatives of the dead to those with minor side-effects, and interviews them not only about the attack and the effects it had, but how people reacted, how it changed their views on life and government and religion, and mostly, about the people themselves; where they work, what they do for fun, what kind of people they are. Murakami turns a true-crime document into a snapshot of Japanese life. Make no mistake though, this is a discomforting and, at turns, horrifying portrait of a seemingly pointless terrorist act. By not just focusing on the relatives of the dead or those left crippled or comatose, he shows us the downstream effect of this one act, of people who still can't avoid their blinding headaches, who cannot sleep without raging nightmares, who still cannot re-adjust to their normal lives because of the intrusion of these few moments. From train conductors to businessmen to students to himself, Murakami explores how all facets of Japanese life reacted to this crime and how it came to shatter people's idyllic visions of a calm and placid society free from the pointless violence that plagues the rest of the world. In the second half of the book, Murakami interviews former cult members and people who are still members and tries to understand what drew them into the cult in the first place. Exploring the roots of their disillusionment and the kernel of interest that drew them into Aum, Murakami explores their progression into the Aum cult as well as Aum's progression in Japanese society; how it grew from a few members to hundreds, how it expanded its operations and how it quickly imploded after the attack. Murakami does the seemingly impossible feat and allows us to see these members as people, first and foremost, and not just as a part of a faceless mob. "Underground" is distinctive in how effortlessly it reads, how seamlessly it blends from one story to the next, and how casually it draws lines of connection from one story to the next. Faceless bystanders and samaritans in one account can show up pages later to give their own point of view. Stories are corroborated and contradicted and the picture that emerges in the end is one with as much confusion and untold stories as the incident itself spawned. Murakami tells of how he was at home during the attack, how he found out through a TV broadcast, and how he came to write the book. What we're left with is a story of cultures, of ideologies, of opinions and observations. It's a rare book because the victims are allowed to tell their stories, even when they protest that their stories are not as important as others', because Murakami

does not intrude with theories or arguments or condescending empathy, because people are treated as people, and not just as casualties or cult members. In the end, Murakami's book works so well because, to him, everyone's story matters, and every piece of information is another facet that constructs a life, a society, a crime and (clichéd though it may be) the human condition. I don't think I've read a better book to come out this year....I don't think you will either.

The Tokyo subway sarin gas attack of 1995 is an event that continues to baffle and anger the Japanese. However, as Murakami points out in his book, it is also something the Japanese would prefer to condemn and move on from rather than analyze and try to understand. Murakami's approach is to interview survivors of the attack, relatives of those that have died, and members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult that, while not involved with the gas attack, were members of Aum at the time the attack occurred. The first two-thirds of the book are dedicated to the survivors and relative interviews. While touching, shocking and surprising, after the first dozen or two, they begin to take on a numbing quality. So many of the stories share so many themes ("I had to get to work...", "I'm not so much angry as confused", etc.) that, in retrospect, they run together. In fact, the two things about the attack that stand out most in my mind are that (a) while some of the survivors and family members are incredibly angry over the situation, most are not so much angry as confused and hurt, and (b) while almost everyone agrees that the situation was handled incredibly poorly by the emergency services and lives were lost as a result, no one wants to sue. They merely wish to get on with their lives. Where the book really shines, though, is in the Aum interviews. Murakami profiles members of the cult who came from different backgrounds, had different aims in joining Aum and saw different sides of it as members. In this section, we begin to see the breakdown of the "salaryman phenomenon" in Japan at a personal level. People who joined were mostly intelligent, if highly misguided, and wanted more from their lives than office work could give them. Between the two groups, Murakami begins to show a Japan with serious social issues straining below the surface of an otherwise quiet and conformist society. Admittedly, this sort of classification may be a little premature for Japan, but it does indicate the Japan faces the same problems today that many others (like the US) face. I recommend this book not just for those interested in the gas attack and the people who were that committed it, but also for the political scientists and the social anthropologists wanting a look at the problems and difficulties facing Japan as a country. While, as Murakami himself says, he is primarily a novelist and this is his first real attempt at nonfiction, I hope he revisits this format in the future when looking at other modern problems in Japan.

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