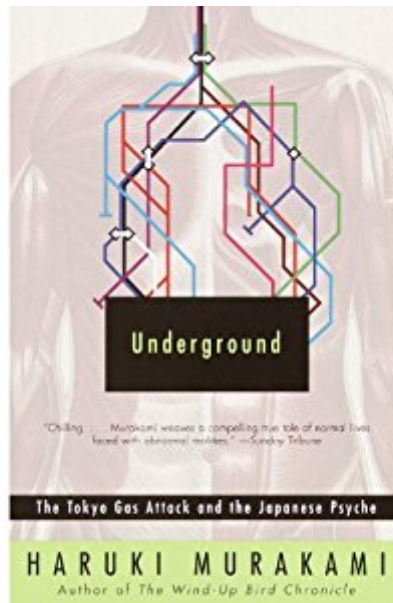




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# Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack And The Japanese Psyche



## 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

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.

An interesting read, but a little redundant. A lot of the stories collected are versions of the same story -- someone was on their way to work, felt weird, went to the hospital, found out it was gas, etc. Some of the stories are really compelling, though, so I'd say it's worth the price of entry. What's most interesting is how victims feel about the perpetrators, but I'll leave that for you to discover.

First of all, considering who the author is, I should note that interest in Murakami's (wondrous) novels is not going to necessarily going 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 twilight 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.

Harrowing. Wonderful read, but don't expect to find Murakami's lighter, more surreal style. The subject matter is treated with the respect and gravitas it deserves.

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