

**Books: What I talk about when I talk about running
by Haruki Murakami
Translated by Philip Gabriel. Publisher Harvill Secker/Knopf:
2008.**

Inside the Mind of a Marathon Runner

Reading, writing and running: three skills I did not expect to encounter alongside each other with much passion. I grew up playing sports and desired a physically active career. Of the three skills, running came to me last and the hardest. I took it up after the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. One Olympiad later, I find I share these interests with Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, who has written a memoir about the role that marathon running plays in his life.

The Athens Olympics was a turning point in my amateur athletics career because the city's heavy smog made me rethink my asthma treatment. I enjoyed anaerobic or short-burst events, but quickly became short of breath. After taking my fix of salbutamol — technically doping, if not prescribed — I could continue in some limited fashion, but endurance events eluded me. I decided on returning from Athens to start taking a preventive inhaler, beclomethasone

dipropionate. My doctor had prescribed it, but I had never taken it, objecting to being permanently medicated for a mild and reasonably well-controlled condition. Within a month of using it, I could run for an hour without taking a deep breath or additional medication. The experience was transformative.

This is how it felt reading *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. At the start, I thought Murakami and I were different: he is human and I am a cyborg. When I run, I am motivated by the thought that this should not be possible, that I am defying nature. I feel 'better than well'. Murakami started running when he was 33, about the same age I am now, so I hoped to find some common ground. And so it proved.

I was asked to review Murakami's memoir in the context of my expertise on the ethics of biotechnological enhancements. Perhaps this text might persuade me of the value of remaining unenhanced by technology. After all, the experience of a long-distance runner — international novelist or not — is typically existential, with narrative usually more important than competition to an individual's performance. Runners refer to being in the 'zone' or the 'runner's high', the latter describing the euphoria experienced when running long distances.

Murakami speaks of his body in mechanical, performative terms, attributing autonomy to each body part, thereby invoking the prospect of intelligent biology. His muscles talk to him, plead with him and sometimes work with him. Murakami's primary mode of performance enhancement is training, and critics and advocates of the integration of humans and technology should pause to reflect on that. Amid the mire of moral discourse on enhancements such as designer steroids, competitive sport comprises a technological relationship between biology and artifice. Murakami celebrates technological support in various, non-doping ways. For example, he coats his body in Vaseline before donning a wetsuit at the start of a triathlon to improve the efficiency of his switchover from swimming to cycling, when he must remove the suit. He uses a feather-light bicycle to optimize his speed and explains how competitive cycling is unlike riding for leisure: generating power on the up-pedal motion changes the muscle group required.

Running nourishes Murakami's writing. It allows him space, a void that he sees as a necessary encounter with nothingness to balance the verbose side of his life. Like many mountaineers who are compelled to climb, he runs because some unknown force makes him do so — his legs need to run, he says.

Readers who hope to understand Murakami through this memoir might feel unsatisfied. It is not about Murakami's life overall, but of his life as a runner. No great mysteries are uncovered about his writing, where it comes from, what inspires it, or what his books mean to him. The style is different from his other literary works. Yet it reveals that, for Murakami, books and running cannot be separated. With this his only published memoir, it is all we have of the writer at his most intimate.

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running reveals what kind of man Murakami is, rather than describing what he has done. He is a humble, self-effacing author who struggles with the idea of writing about himself, finding his fortunes to be a matter of unlikely chance. He succeeds because he has a strong sense of his own identity, his goals and expectations.

After one ultramarathon, around 25 full marathons, countless half-marathons and triathlons, and with his prodigious literary success, Murakami is a great example of the view that exercise stimulates the mind. I still wouldn't run a city marathon during any summer, certainly not in Athens or Beijing, without some kind of technological enhancement.

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Sources

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<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v454/n7204/full/454583a.html>