



## Analysis & Recommendations

**Title:** WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS

**Author:** Kazuo Ishiguro

**Assessed By:** Stephany Tan

### Strengths

- “Unreliable detective” story
- Tightly controlled narrative
- East meets West intrigue

### Weaknesses

- Delayed inciting incident
- Implausibilities

### Audience/Market

- FIC019000 FICTION / Literary
- FIC025000 FICTION / Psychological

### Nonfiction Tie-ins

- TRU006000 TRUE CRIME / Abductions, Kidnappings & Missing Persons
- HIS027130 HISTORY / Military / Wars & Conflicts (Other)



## Logline

Booker Prize-winning author of *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY* Kazuo Ishiguro's *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS* explores the distortion of memory over time as an acclaimed London detective returns to Shanghai amid the Sino-Japanese War in search of his parents who mysteriously vanished when he was a child.

## Analysis

*WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS* tackles a sprawling narrative. At the center of it stands Christopher Banks, a renowned London detective who seems to have it all—yet he harbors a painful past that eventually claws its way into the present. The novel presents a compelling interpretation of the consuming nature of memory: the past never leaves until you confront it head-on. In Christopher's case, we come to realize this outwardly composed and rational detective may not be the most reliable narrator. When the story reaches the brutal war-zone sequence, it becomes even harder for Christopher (and the reader!) to trust his own memories. These lapses in consciousness present a most interesting type of protagonist: the flawed hero.

The reader is treated to wonderful and expertly controlled prose introducing Christopher the adult. It's evident in the opening pages that you have a talent for capturing the emotions of a man who is of the world yet remains an island in his own heart. The story begins with an invitation to a society gathering where Christopher catches his first glimpse of the woman who would go on to inspire and mystify him



throughout the rest of his life. However, since your book is not a romance novel, no matter how enchanted Christopher is by Sarah, their first meeting is not the inciting incident.

The inciting incident in *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS* occurs when Christopher's mother is kidnapped. Although it happens in a flashback, it is the pivotal moment when Christopher, although only eleven years old, feels compelled to act outside of himself. It is the first time we find him feeling protective and called to action, rather than going with the flow. Repositioning his mother's kidnapping to occur within the first two chapters strengthens the novel's opening and immediately discloses Christopher's motivations—all of which help to effectively set up the rest of the narrative.

You've created a well-developed protagonist in Christopher. He exhibits the rationality and prudence of a true detective and goes through the narrative relatively stable. This is why it was so surprising when he becomes frighteningly volatile during the war-zone sequence. It seemed out of character for him to feverishly demand to be taken to the house where his parents are believed to be imprisoned. This sequence jolted me out of the restrained narrative you've so effectively built up. It seems this sequence is meant to reflect how Christopher never fully abandoned the fantasies he acted out with his childhood friend Akira, thus his trouble separating fantasy from reality. Tightening the war sequence to emphasize Christopher's slip into fantasy will allow his actions to have its desired impact.



Christopher's memories of Sarah are also tinged with fantasy. Their interactions are often whimsical, involving veiled repartees. I love how you deftly balance Sarah's impulses with Christopher's own restraints. It's a relationship built on clever yet careful banter. This is why it caught me off guard when Christopher immediately accepts Sarah's proposal to run away to Macau, without the usual restraint we've come to expect from his exchanges with her. His reason for agreeing to run away with Sarah, as well as his impulsiveness during the war-zone sequence, must be clear to the reader. A character analysis will easily flesh out his motivations.

WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS involves an engaging mystery, but it is not a straightforward mystery and detective novel. More appropriate categories would be psychological fiction or literary fiction due to the focus on Christopher's psychological and emotional transformation. This is why it's crucial to clarify his motivations upfront and make sure his development throughout the story remains plausible.

Since the novel is largely a character study and demonstrates a more artful prose, I recommend targeting the literary fiction market to give WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS its best chance at success. However, you can take the book beyond the fiction market by highlighting its nonfiction elements as well. With the missing persons case and the Sino-Japanese War serving as backdrop to the narrative, you have the opportunity to promote the book at true crime and military history outlets in addition to traditional distribution channels. This is something we can discuss during book proposal creation.



WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS features a solid foundation. You have an unusual protagonist whose guardedness keeps readers on their toes, a skillfully executed narrative, and a clear target market in literary fiction, history, and true crime. A few minor amendments will further elevate the novel’s impact and give your readers the thoughtful, engaging story they deserve.

### Recommendations

1. Move Christopher’s mother’s kidnapping to the first or second chapter. Tighten the anecdotes involving Akira. The first two chapters should introduce the inciting incident and focus on Christopher’s childhood loss.
2. Tighten the war-zone sequence. Although it would work well in a genre thriller, it dilutes the narrative in a literary novel. Shorten the parts with the driver and military police, and instead focus the sequence on Christopher’s meeting with “Akira”—this is one of the novel’s big payoffs for the reader.
3. Allow Christopher to hesitate before accepting Sarah’s offer to run away. Perhaps he brings up Jennifer, or the unresolved case he is working on regarding his parents. Give him an opportunity to hesitate; this brings his motivations in line with reader expectations.