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Haruki Murakami, a writer both mystical and hip, is the West's favorite Japanese novelist. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Murakami lived abroad until 1995. That year, two disasters struck Japan: the lethal earthquake in Kobe and the deadly poison gas attacks in the Tokyo subway. Spurred by these tragic events, Murakami returned home. The stories in After the Quake are set in the months that fell between the earthquake and the subway attack, presenting a world marked by despair, hope, and a kind of human instinct for transformation. A teenage girl and a middle-aged man share a hobby of making beach bonfires; a businesswoman travels to Thailand and, quietly, confronts her own death; three friends act out a modern-day Tokyo version of Jules and Jim. There's a surreal element running through the collection in the form of unlikely frogs turning up in unlikely places. News of the earthquake hums throughout. The book opens with the dull buzz of disaster-watching: "Five straight days she spent in front of the television, staring at the crumbled banks and hospitals, whole blocks of stores in flames, severed rail lines and expressways." With language that's never self-consciously lyrical or show-offy, Murakami constructs stories as tight and beautiful as poems. There's no turning back for his people; there's only before and after the quake. --Claire Dederer --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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