



# A Tale for the Time Being Reader's Guide

**BY RUTH OZEKI**

Category: Literary Fiction

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## **READERS GUIDE**

### **Questions and Topics for Discussion**

#### INTRODUCTION

Amid the garish neon glare of a district of Tokyo known as Akiba Electric Town, sixteen-year-old Naoko Yasutani pours out her thoughts into a diary. She is drinking coffee in a café where the waitresses dress like French maids and a greasy-looking patron gazes at her with dubious intent. The setting is hardly ordinary, but Nao, as she is called, is not an ordinary girl. Humbled by poverty since her father lost his high-income tech job in Silicon Valley and had to move the family back to Japan, Nao has been bullied mercilessly in school. Seemingly unmanned by his professional failure, her father, Haruki, has attempted suicide. Nao herself regards her diary as a protracted suicide note – but one she will not finish until she has committed to its pages the life story of her 104-year-old great-grandmother, a Buddhist nun named Jiko.

Years later on the other side of the Pacific, shielded from damage by a freezer bag and a Hello Kitty lunchbox, Nao's diary washes up on the shore of British Columbia and falls into the hands of a writer named Ruth, who becomes captivated by Nao's revelations. As Ruth's fascination grows, however, so does her sense of dread: Has Nao followed through on her suicidal pledge? If not, is there still time to save her? Or has Nao survived her bout with adolescent angst, only to be swept away to her death by the cataclysmic tsunami of March 2011? Moved to compassion by the young girl's words, Ruth ransacks the Internet for a trace of Naoko Yasutani or her father. She finds almost nothing there, but the mystery deepens when she discovers a second document in the same packet: a collection of letters from Haruki's uncle, Jiko's son, who was conscripted against his will in 1943 to serve the Emperor as a kamikaze pilot.

Slowly Ruth pulls the pieces of the mystery together, learning about the lives of an extraordinary family whose history is both inspirational and tragic. Day by day, in her quest to save a girl she has never met, Ruth begins to acquire the wisdom that just might save herself. And above all the mystery and drama stands the presiding spirit of great-grandmother Jiko, an Eastern saint whose prayers and paradoxes point the way to a more settled sense of self.

Unflinching in its portrayal of the deep conflicts in Japanese culture, equally incisive in its assessments of the West, *A Tale for the Time Being* exposes a world on the edge of catastrophe. Simultaneously, with exquisite delicacy and an intimate sense of human motivation, it reveals its characters as kind, compassionate, and worthy of deliverance from the evils we do to ourselves and to one another. Ever mindful of the small, *A Tale for the Time Being* also contemplates the large: quantum mechanics, Zen meditation, computer science, climate change, and the nature of being all pass beneath the author's thoughtful gaze. A novel about both the near-impossibility and the necessity of communication, *A Tale for the Time Being* communicates a love of life in all its complex beauty.

#### ABOUT RUTH OZEKI

A native of New Haven, Connecticut, Ruth Ozeki immersed herself in English and Asian Studies at Smith College and has traveled extensively in Asia. She received a fellowship from the Japanese Ministry of Education to do graduate work in classical Japanese literature at Nara Women's University in Japan. After working in cinematic set design and television production, she became an independent filmmaker, winning awards for her movies *Body of Correspondence* and *Halving the Bones*. Ozeki's two earlier novels, *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*, were both recognized as Notable Books by The New York Times. An ordained Zen Buddhist priest, Ozeki divides her time between New York and British Columbia, where she writes, runs, and raises ducks with her husband, artist Oliver Kellhammer.

#### A CONVERSATION WITH RUTH OZEKI

Q. In creating the character of Ruth for *A Tale for the Time Being*, you appear to have drawn heavily on your own recent life, situating her in British Columbia, giving her your name, and even naming her husband after yours. In what ways are you and the

fictional Ruth most alike, and at what points do you most widely differ?

I think of Ruth's story as a fictional memoir. The character of Ruth is semi-fictional (although if pressed, I would have to call myself semi-fictional, too!). Character Ruth and author Ruth have much in common—a husband named Oliver, a mother with Alzheimer's, a moody cat, a house on an island in Desolation Sound—but character Ruth has a more limited perspective and a different set of experiences.

Obviously, I did not really find a young Japanese schoolgirl's diary on the beach. But the fictional memoir plays out of a set of "what if?" propositions: What if I had found such a diary, and started reading it, and become obsessed with it? What if I'd never encountered Zen, or learned to meditate? What if I could change the past in my dreams? What kind of Ruth would I be?

And the fact is, I did wake up one day with the words and voice of a young girl named Nao in my head, and like my fictional Ruth, I could not stop thinking about her until I discovered her fate. You can look at the novel as a parable about the process of writing fiction. What happens when a character appears and calls the novelist into being? It's not meant to be taken literally. This is magic—the very ordinary magic of writing fiction.

Q. The character of Ruth's husband, Oliver, is intriguing. He's plainly in love with his wife but capable of almost Asperger-like gaps in his sensitivity. Your husband is named Oliver as well. How does the real Oliver feel about your portrait of his Doppelgänger?

Don't all husbands have almost Asperger-like gaps in their sensitivity?

Just kidding.

My "real" husband Oliver understands the nature of fiction. His only comment upon reading the novel was that I'd made the character Oliver too smart. He was afraid that when people who'd read the book met him, they would be disappointed. Anyone who knows him knows how unfounded his fears are. This is one of those cases where reality far surpasses fiction.

Q. Ruth, as you point out in the book, is a paradoxical bilingual pun; transposed into Japanese, it can mean either roots or absence. Do you find this paradox at work in your own personality?

I think we're all paradoxical, but in my case, the paradox is overt and conspicuous. It's built into my DNA. I'm half-Japanese and half-Caucasian. I'm American and Canadian, and I speak Japanese. I have homes, real and spiritual, in three cultures. So yes, paradoxical, multifaceted, hybrid . . . this is who I am.

I see this paradoxical nature in my writing, and apparently others do, too. Jane Smiley, in a review for the Chicago Tribune, called *My Year of Meats* "a comical-satirical-farcical-epical-tragical-romantical novel." I like that.

Q. The name of the novel's teenage diarist, Nao, also puns bilingually; the character is continually trying to take hold of the *now*, only to find that it keeps vanishing into the *then*. Why is the instantaneous moment so important to Nao, and, evidently, to you?

The moment, this moment, is all there is! If you don't believe me, just think about it for a minute. Does the past exist? If so, where is it? Show it to me. And the future? I can imagine what it might be, but it doesn't exist yet, and when it arrives, it'll never be quite what I imagined.

This present moment is all there is, only most of us are too preoccupied with the past and the future to notice it. Zen Buddhist practice teaches you to be aware and awake in the present moment-to wake up to your life at the very moment you are living it. This is the *supapawa!* that Old Jiko teaches Nao, and it enables her to wake up to her life, rather than hiding out in her fictional memories of Sunnyvale. It's very realistic.

Neuroscience has shown that memory is not an accurate representation of an event in the past. Rather, when we remember something, we're not remembering the actual event, but instead we're remembering our last memory of the event. It's an emergent and iterative process, so every time we remember, we change the past a little bit more. It's fiction!

Q. Like Nao in your novel, though at a later age, you had the experience of studying in Japan after living an American youth. What were the challenges you confronted as a Japanese-American woman in Japan, and how, if at all, did they help you understand Nao's character and problems?

Well, I was an adult when I went to Japan, and I was never picked on there. I was treated very kindly by my Japanese friends, classmates, and co-workers, and in fact I think they were probably a little scared of me.

Any bullying I encountered was in the U.S. when I was little. I got beat up in the washroom of my elementary school in East Palo Alto when I was in second grade. Kids called me Jap and yellow, and they made jokes about my eyes slanting in different directions because I was “half.” Later on, guys used to tell me a similar joke about the skewed orientation of Japanese female genitalia.

Americans saw me as Japanese, so I grew up identifying as such, and I felt the pressure to conform to all the stereotypes that went along with this identity. I felt I had to be smart, pretty, docile, obedient, talented in music (preferably the violin) and good at math, which I wasn’t. When I finally went to Japan, in college, it was clear that Japanese people did not see me as Japanese at all. They saw me as a gaijin, a foreigner. This came as a huge surprise, and it enabled me to get in touch with my inner American. I realized it was okay for me to be loud and obnoxious. It was okay to have a sense of humor. This was my birthright, too. What a relief!

Q. Nao’s feelings of isolation stand at the center of the novel, but one senses loneliness and a sense of incompleteness in Ruth as well. Though the two never meet, they somehow create between them a mystic wholeness. How are we to understand the “magic” they create?

What a lovely question. There are many ways to answer it, but here’s the bit I think is crucial. Nao and Ruth’s relationship is the creative symbiosis that exists between a writer and reader. Nao is the writer. She writes her book and sends it into the world, and in so doing, she calls Ruth, her reader, into being.

Writers and readers are engaged in a reciprocal and mutually co-creative enterprise, and the book is the field of their collaboration. It’s very personal, and very individual, too. The book I write might be very different from the book you read, and this is because of the symbolic nature of the written word. Every word I write must be unlocked by the eye and decoded by the mind of a reader. My scenes come to life because a reader invests them with his or her experience and imagination. Of course, this means that every reader is reading a very different book, too. The *A Tale for the Time Being* that Reader A reads is very different from the *A Tale for the Time Being* that Reader Q reads, and anyone who has ever been in a book club knows this to be true. Again, it’s a beautiful analogue to quantum Many Worlds. The magic of fiction, of the written word, is that it is endlessly and infinitely generative.

Have you ever had the experience of reading a book and feeling that it was written just for you? I feel that way from time to time, and it's not a delusion. There's truth in it, because I'm co-creating the book with the author, and sometimes the symbiosis is particularly resonant. "You're my kind of time being," Nao writes to Ruth, "and together we'll make magic!" The novel, quite literally, is the magic that they make.

Q. Readers of *A Tale for the Time Being* will discover a book that poses a host of large questions. To begin with, it is a novel about the tremendous importance but sometimes near-impossibility of communication. Nao seeks an unknown interlocutor through her diary, Ruth's battles to extract information from the Internet become titanic, and Nao and her father both nearly die because of poor communication. In our age of instant and mass communication, why have we become so bad at talking with one another?

Yes, we do seem to spend a lot of time speaking into the void, don't we? As Nao says, "There's nothing sadder than cyberspace when you're floating around out there, all alone, talking to yourself."

But the point is that Nao's diary did make the connection and find its perfect reader. Nao sent it out into the world, like a message in a bottle, and it floated up onto Ruth's shore. It gave Character Ruth a quest (and all characters need quests, after all!) and brought her to life. And you could say that it redeemed Author Ruth's life as well! So the communication circuit is complete and *A Tale for the Time Being* goes out into the world.

As to your question of why we've become such poor communicators, I think it's because we're impatient. The instantaneous nature of our communication media is only exacerbating this very human tendency, which goes back to why I think the present moment is so important. We have to learn to be better time beings. We have to learn to take our time and to stop wasting it. We can do this by cultivating our supapawa! Our supapawa can help us feel less overwhelmed. It trains us to become kinder and more patient with ourselves and others, and most of all, to listen.

Q. Your book also powerfully addresses the question of identity. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, people are seldom just people. They can be accretions of atoms, pulsations of energy, and, most significantly, what you refer to as "time beings." Would you explain the idea of a person as a "time being"?

Well, again, to quote Nao, “A time being is you and me and every one of us who is, and was, and ever will be. . . .” But it’s not just people who are time beings. Everything that exists in the universe is a time being, because everything, from subatomic particles to galaxies, comes and goes. We are all fluid and constantly changing. This is our identity, not to have a fixed identity. We are temporal beings, and we flow from one form to another.

Old Jiko uses the analogy of a wave. Does a wave have an identity separate from the ocean? Well, yes and no. When it pops up as a white cap or as a tsunami, yes. It is very much its own thing. But it’s never not a part of the ocean, and in time it changes, sinking down and becoming indistinguishable again. We are like waves that pop up and move along the earth’s surface for a while before sinking back down and becoming part of everything else. Forests are like this, too. Each tree, even those that grow to be a thousand years old, eventually dies and becomes part of the humus and the forest floor again, where it nurtures saplings.

These are very old Buddhist teachings, and the phrase “time being” comes from a thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master named Eihei Dogen. He wrote an essay, often translated as “Time Being” or “Being Time,” which I think Heidegger had probably read or at least knew about it when he wrote *Being and Time*.

Q. *A Tale for the Time Being* often alludes to Marcel Proust and his great multi-volume novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. How did Proust and his reflections on time and memory influence your writing of your novel?

Both Nao and Ruth are preoccupied with the past. Nao pines for her younger days in Sunnyvale. Ruth longs for her life in Manhattan and is trying (and failing) to write a memoir. They are stuck in the dream worlds of memory.

Proust was preoccupied with the passage of time and the evocative powers of memory. He coined the term “involuntary memory” to refer to a particular quality of remembrance, in which memory of the past arises unexpectedly, often triggered by some sensual experience, and is itself experienced sensually.

These are the waters that writers and readers spend their days paddling around in. We rely on our involuntary memory both to write and to read, because our memories of our lived experiences are what bring life to the words on the page, or in Proust’s case, many thousands of pages.

(Full disclosure: as of this present moment, as I'm writing these words, I have yet to read all of Proust's many thousands of pages, a deficiency which, I hope, will be rectified in time.)

Q. Your novel's portrayal of Japanese popular culture is both discerning and unsettling. Features of the human landscape that you depict, including cosplay and French maid cafés, present a first glance an almost cloying, childlike sweetness. However, they can mask a more perverse and threatening reality. Do you have any more thoughts on the peculiar mix of innocence and precocious sexuality that one finds in Japanese pop culture?

Hmm. Interesting. I think you're looking at this through a somewhat Eurocentric and post-Freudian lens. I don't think that cosplay and maid cafés are cloyingly or sweetly masking anything. It's play. And play requires reality to be perverse and threatening, because without that, why would we need play? That tension is what makes play interesting.

Children are sweet and innocent, and they are sexual, too. This apparent duality or dichotomy between childlike innocence and sexuality, is less pronounced in Asia, but we in the west like to keep the two very far apart, and we find it very threatening when the two get too close.

This didn't used to be the case, and when you look at the old Germanic tales, you can see they had teeth and were very dark, indeed. But that darkness has been lost. Disney took the teeth out of the tales.

And it's important to recall that the manga aesthetic of young girls with huge eyes and breasts and tiny dresses, which is such a characteristic of manga and Japanese pop, comes from the west, from cartoon characters like Betty Boop, who was the mother of precocious animé sexuality.

Q. A poignant subplot of *A Tale for the Time Being* is the story of Haruki #1, the unwillingly conscripted *kamikaze* pilot who is torn between loyalty to country and the dictates of his conscience. It seems that the legacy of World War II remains much more present in Japan's public consciousness than in America's. What do you see as the effects of this cultural memory?



Well, World War II was the last war that Japan fought, whereas America has fought many wars since then. And Japan was the target of two atomic bombs and massive firebombings-horrific events that were seared into the Japanese cultural memory in a way that we, in North America, have never experienced and cannot begin to imagine, and therefore it's easy for us to forget.

The effects of this cultural memory have been to keep Japan dedicated to maintaining a nonmilitary presence in the world and in international politics. Japan does not maintain an army, but rather a Self-Defense Force (supported by U.S. military bases that have maintained a presence there since the Occupation). Unfortunately, this cultural memory seems to be fading, and nationalistic and right wing factions in the government are continually trying to rewrite history. One big issue in Japan is the continual attempt to write certain heinous war crimes, like the Rape of Nanking, or the enslavement and enforced prostitution of thousands of women, euphemistically called "comfort women," out of the country's textbooks. And the ongoing dispute with China over ownership of a string of unpopulated islands (Diaoyu in Chinese, Senkaku in Japanese) has sparked a renewed call to beef up Japan's military.

Q. Of course, America's comparative amnesia on the subject of the war is no less interesting a phenomenon. Your thoughts?

When I was growing up, World War II already seemed like a distant memory, ancient history, but I was born in 1956, and the war had ended only eleven years earlier. Eleven years is *nothing!* No time at all. To put it in a more contemporary perspective, the World Trade Center attacks happened twelve years ago. 9/11 seems like it happened yesterday. We're still living with its fallout.

I was more aware of World War II than most of my friends because my mother was Japanese and my grandfather was interned, so the war was part of my family's narrative. This was not the case for my classmates, even though many of their fathers had fought in the war and were no doubt suffering from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress, a condition that didn't even have a name back then.

In the aftermath of world war, and during my lifetime, the United States has fought in over thirty wars or significant military operations. We've fought in two Indochina Wars, the Korean War, and civil wars in Laos and Cambodia. We've invaded the Dominican Republic and Grenada. We were involved in the Lebanon crisis and the Lebanese Civil War, three incidents in the Gulf of Sidra, the bombing of Libya, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Invasion of Panama. We fought two Gulf Wars, the Somali Civil War, and the Bosnian War, and we intervened in Haiti. We bombed Afghanistan and Sudan and

fought in the Kosovo War. Since the turn of the new millennium, we've been waging the ongoing War on Terror, which includes wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, the Trans Sahara, Pakistan, Yemen, and Africa. In 2003 we sent troops to Liberia, and most recently to Libya, again.

Operation Power Pack. Operation Urgent Fury. Operation Blue Bat. Operation Prairie Fire. Operation El Dorado Canyon. Operation Earnest Will. Operation Prime Chance. Operation Nimble Archer. Operation Praying Mantis. Operation Just Cause. Operation Desert Storm. Operation Provide Comfort. Operation Northern Watch. Operation Southern Focus. Operation Desert Fox. Operation Restore Hope. Operation Deliberate Force. Operation Uphold Democracy. Operation Infinite Reach. Operation Noble Anvil. Operation Enduring Freedom. Operation Freedom Eagle. Operation Iraqi Freedom. Operation Odyssey Dawn.

We've been fighting more or less continually. How many of these wars do I—does anyone—remember? How many more have we never heard about or will we forget?

Q. At least one reader of *A Tale for the Time Being* has said that the book is two novels in one – one of them sounding perfectly American and the other perfectly Japanese. Was this your intention? Are there things that, to you, make a story “Japanese” or “American”?

Well, I don't know about that. I imagine some readers might argue with the “perfectly” part of this assessment. I certainly didn't set out with any intention to make stories that were perfectly anything. I don't write that way, with these kinds of agendas or intentions. The story comes from the characters. That's all.

Q. You seem very interested in the intersections between two modes of thought that are often considered separate: the spiritual and the scientific. How, in your way of thinking, do the two overlap?

I believe that science, or scientific rationalism, is a belief system, just like any religion. It's a belief system masquerading as something that is not a belief system. Something that transcends and is somehow superior to religious belief, which it denigrates to superstition.

Many spiritual writers and thinkers have been captivated by what quantum physics seem to suggest about the nature of reality. And it's true that the metaphorical power and narrative potential of quantum theory is pretty irresistible, especially to a mystic or a fiction writer. I felt it was important not to get too carried away by the slippery magic of the quantum metaphor, and so called on some astrophysicist and scientist friends to make sure I didn't get too woo woo. That's the technical term for the overlap of the spiritual and the scientific you refer to.

Q. Nao intends to use her diary to tell the life story of her great grandmother Jiko, but she never gets around to it, at least in this volume. What do you imagine the untold parts of that story to be like, and do you expect ever to tell it?

I'm glad you noticed this. In this case, I'm actually more interested in what gets left untold. I'm interested in what drops out of history, or what gets dropped. I'm interested in where the holes are.

There's an area of study called agnotology, which has emerged from the history of science and technology. Agnotology refers to the study of culturally produced ignorance or doubt and to the manufacturing of inaccurate or misleading scientific data. An example of this is the way the tobacco industry conspired to obfuscate the proven connection between tobacco use and incidence of cancer. So agnotology is concerned with censorship and suppression of knowledge through willful intention, neglect, or forgetfulness.

Although agnotology usually is concerned with scientific data, I think it applies nicely to the documentation of women's history, or the lack thereof. We can learn a lot by studying what isn't. It seems important to me to leave the gaps and holes, rather than trying to fill them in. And while I know quite a bit about old Jiko's history, I think it's more interesting to leave her story untold.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *A Tale for the Time Being* begins with Ozeki's first-person narrator expressing deep curiosity about the unknown person who might be reading her narrative. How did you respond to this opening and its unusual focus on the circumstances of the reader?

- How does Ozeki seem to view the relationship between a writer and her reader? What do they owe each other? How must they combine in order to, in Nao's phrase, "make magic"?
- Though we may feel for her in her struggles and suffering, Nao is no angel. She is extremely harsh toward her father, and, given the opportunity, she tyrannizes over her hapless schoolmate Daisuke. Does Ozeki sacrifice some of the sympathy that we might otherwise feel for Nao? What does Ozeki's novel gain by making Nao less appealing than she might be?
- More than once in *A Tale for the Time Being*, a character's dream appears to exert physical influence on actual life. Does this phenomenon weaken the novel by detracting from its realism, or does it strengthen the book by adding force to its spiritual or metaphysical dimension?
- Is there a way in which Nao and Ruth form two halves of the same character?
- *A Tale for the Time Being* expresses deep concern about the environment, whether the issue is global warming, nuclear power, or the massive accretions of garbage in the Pacific Ocean. How do Ozeki's observations about the environment affect the mood of her novel, and how do her characters respond to life on a contaminated planet?
- Suicide, whether in the form of Haruki #1's *kamikaze* mission or the contemplated suicides of Haruki #2 and Nao, hangs heavily over *A Tale for the Time Being*. Nevertheless, Ozeki's story manages to affirm life. How does Ozeki use suicide as a means to illustrate the value of life?
- Jiko's daily religious observances include prayers for even the most mundane activities, from washing one's feet to visiting the toilet. How did you respond to all of these spiritual gestures? Do they seem merely absurd, or do they foster a deeper appreciation of the world? Have your own religious ideas or spiritual practices been influenced by reading *A Tale for the Time Being*?
- Responding to the ill treatment that Nao reports in her diary, Ruth's husband Oliver observes, "We live in a bully culture" (121). Is he right? What responses to society's bullying does *A Tale for the Time Being* suggest? Are they likely to be effective?
- Haruki #1 cites a Zen master for the idea that "a single moment is all we need to establish our human will and attain truth" (324). What kind of enlightenment is Ozeki calling for in *A Tale for the Time Being*? Is it really available to everyone? Would you try to achieve it if you could? Why or why not?

- Imagine that you had a notebook like Nao's diary and you wanted to communicate with an unknown reader as she does. What would you write about? Would you be as honest as Nao is with us? What are the benefits and risks of writing such a document?
  - Ozeki makes many references to scientific concepts like quantum mechanics and the paradox of Schrödinger's cat. What role do these musings play in the novel? Do they add an important dimension, or are they mostly confusing?
  - What lessons does Jiko try to teach Nao to develop her "supapawa"? Are they the same that you would try to impart to a troubled teenaged girl? How else might you approach Nao's depression and other problems?
  - Even after receiving these lessons, Nao does not change completely. Indeed, she gets in even worse trouble after the summer at her great-grandmother's temple. What more does she need to learn before she can do something positive with her life?
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