

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Ruth Ozeki is a novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest, whose books have garnered international acclaim for their ability to integrate issues of science, technology, religion, environmental politics, and global pop culture into unique, hybrid, narrative forms.

Her new novel, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, forthcoming from Viking in September 2021, tells the story of a young boy who, after the death of his father, starts to hear voices and finds solace in the companionship of his very own book.

Her first two novels, *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), have been translated into 11 languages and published in 14 countries. Her third novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), won the LA Times Book Prize, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and has been published in over thirty countries.

Her work of personal non-fiction, *The Face: A Time Code* (2016), was published by Restless Books as part of their groundbreaking series called *The Face*.

Ruth's documentary and dramatic independent films, including *Halving the Bones*, have been shown on PBS, at the Sundance Film Festival, and at colleges and universities across the country.

A longtime Buddhist practitioner, Ruth was ordained in 2010 and is affiliated with the Brooklyn Zen Center and the Everyday Zen Foundation.

She splits her time between Western Massachusetts, New York City, and British Columbia, Canada. She currently teaches creative writing at Smith College, where she is the Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities in the Department of English Language and Literature.

- Author's website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *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?

2. 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"?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. Is there a way in which Nao and Ruth form two halves of the same character?
6. *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?
7. 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?
8. 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*?
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. 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?
12. 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?

13. 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?
14. 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?

- Penguin Random House

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

/ Starred Review */* Ozeki has shown herself, in the novels *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All over Creation* (2003), to be a careful, considerate writer who obviously insists on writing what she wants to write and in the fashion she prefers. That special care and concern are also detectable in her latest novel, an intriguing, even beautiful narrative remarkable for its unusual but attentively structured plot. Ruth—the character Ruth—is a writer living in a remote corner of the Pacific coast of British Columbia who is currently thwarted by writer’s block as she attempts to compose a memoir. One day she finds a collection of materials contained in a lunchbox that has washed up on the beach. As if she has unleashed a magical mist, the items she finds inside, namely a journal and a collection of letters, envelop her in the details—the dramas—of someone else’s life. The life she has stumbled into is that of a Japanese teenager, who, believing suicide is the only relief for her teenage angst, nevertheless is determined, before she commits that final act, to write down the story of her great-grandmother, a Buddhist nun. We go from one story line to the other, back and forth across the Pacific, but the reader never loses place or interest. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: The publisher is in love with this novel and will do everything from providing an author tour to presenting extensive radio and online publicity campaigns to bring its virtues to a wide reading audience. -- Hooper, Brad (Reviewed 02-15-2013) (Booklist, vol 109, number 12, p29)

Publisher’s Weekly

Ozeki’s absorbing third novel (after *All Over Creation*) is an extended meditation on writing, time, and people in time: “time beings.” Nao Yasutani is a Japanese schoolgirl who plans to “drop out of time”—to kill herself as a way of escaping her dreary life. First, though, she intends to write in her diary the life story of her great-grandmother Jiko, a Zen Buddhist nun. But Nao actually ends up writing her own life story, and the diary eventually washes up on the shore of Canada’s Vancouver Island, where a novelist called Ruth lives. Ruth finds the diary in a freezer bag with some old letters in French and a vintage watch. Ruth’s investigation into how the bag traveled from Japan to her island, and why it contains what it does, alternates with Nao’s chapters. The characters’ lives are finely drawn, from Ruth’s rustic lifestyle to the Yasutani family’s straitened existence after moving from Sunnyvale, Calif., to Tokyo. Nao’s winsome voice contrasts with Ruth’s intellectual ponderings to make up a lyrical disquisition on writing’s power to transcend time and place. This tale from Ozeki, a Zen Buddhist priest, is sure to please anyone who values a good story broadened with intellectual vigor. Agent: Molly Friedrich, Friedrich Literary Agency. (Mar. 12) --Staff (Reviewed January 14, 2013) (Publishers Weekly, vol 260, issue 02, p)

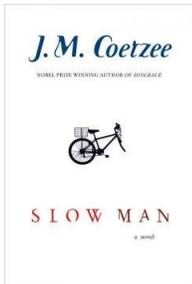
Library Journal

Ozeki's beautifully crafted work, which arrives a decade after her last novel, *All Over Creation*, strives to unravel the mystery of a 16-year-old Japanese American girl's diary found washed ashore in Whaletown, British Columbia. Born in Sunnyvale, CA, Nao logs her diary entries from Japan since her father returned the family there following the burst of the dot-com bubble. Ozeki creates a host of colorful tales surrounding Nao and her 104-year-old great-grandmother, Jiko, a Buddhist nun, and great uncle Haruki, who was a kamikaze pilot in World War II. Meanwhile, in Canada, author Ruth and her husband, Oliver, are reading Nao's entries in the year 2012, wondering whether the diary is debris from the devastating tsunami that hit Japan in 2011, and whether Nao is still alive. VERDICT Ozeki adeptly intertwines past and present while weaving bits of history into her stories. Topics such as bullying, politics, depression, suicidal tendencies, and Buddhism are explored throughout, and as in previous novels, Ozeki validates her gift for writing prose that raises thought-provoking issues for readers to ponder long after finishing the book. [See Prepub Alert, 9/24/12.]— Shirley Quan, Orange Cty. P.L., Santa Ana, CA --Shirley Quan (Reviewed April 15, 2013) (Library Journal, vol 138, issue 17, p76)

Kirkus Reviews

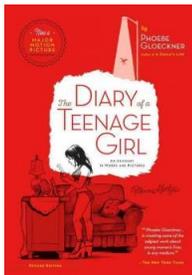
/ Starred Review */* Ozeki's magnificent third novel (*All Over Creation*, 2003, etc.) brings together a Japanese girl's diary and a transplanted American novelist to meditate on everything from bullying to the nature of conscience and the meaning of life. On the beach of an island off British Columbia's coast, Ruth finds a Hello Kitty lunchbox containing a stack of letters and a red book. The book contains 16-year-old Nao's diary, bound within the covers of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* --and that's no accident, since both funny, grieving Nao and blocked, homesick Ruth are obsessed with time : how it passes, how we live in it. Nao wants to "drop out of time;" so does her father, a computer programmer who spent 10 years in California's Silicon Valley before the dot-com bust apparently sent the family back to Tokyo and subjected Nao to vicious bullying at school. Ruth moved from New York City to Canada since it was an easier place to care for her sick husband and dying mother but now feels the move was "a withdrawal" and is finding it hard to write. She plunges into Nao's diary, which also includes the stories of her 104-year-old great-grandmother, Jiko, an anarchist and feminist turned Buddhist nun, and Jiko's son Haruki, a philosophy student forced to become a kamikaze pilot during World War II. The letters in the lunchbox are Haruki's, and his secret army diary begins the book's extended climax, which transcends bitter anguish to achieve heartbreaking poignancy as both Nao and Ruth discover what it truly means to be "a time being." Ozeki faultlessly captures the slangy cadences of a contemporary teen's voice even as she uses it to convey Nao's pain and to unobtrusively offer a quiet introduction to the practice and wisdom of Zen through Jiko's talks with her great-granddaughter. The novel's seamless web of language, metaphor and meaning can't be disentangled from its powerful emotional impact: These are characters we care for deeply, imparting vital life lessons through the magic of storytelling. A masterpiece, pure and simple. (Kirkus Reviews, February 1, 2013)

READALIKES



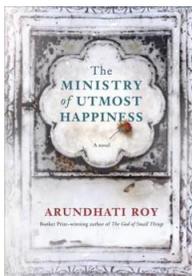
***Slow Man* by J.M. Coetzee**

Dependent on others after losing his leg in an accident, sixty-year-old Paul Rayment finds himself falling in love with a down-to-earth Croatian nurse and encouraged by a mysterious writer to take an activist role in his own life.



***The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner**

A fifteen-year-old girl longs for love and acceptance and struggles with her own precocious sexuality.



***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy**

A provocative love story meanders through a spectrum of powerful emotions experienced by diverse protagonists, including a grieving father who writes a letter profiling the people who came to his 5-year-old daughter's funeral and two longtime friends at a guest house who sleep wrapped around each other like newlyweds.