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### A Novelist's Primer for Remaining Flexible in Times of Uncertainty

In *A Tale For the Time Being*, Ruth Ozeki challenges her readers with hybrid realism and fantastic elements that push the boundaries of fiction. She creates a narrative web that pulls in stories from myriad times and places. She even allows her personal and family life to become entangled with the story, writing a nearly identical version of herself as the protagonist. The experiences are tailored to generate questions and help the readers form ideas. There are no easy answers, but there are many open-ended conclusions in the story. Much of this was a reaction to

Ozeki began writing the novel in 2006, and just when she felt it was ready to publish in 2011 a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami forever changed the landscape of Japan. The ideas of uncertainty and change are a current sweeping throughout Ozeki's narrative. They were present before the major rewrite she conducted prior to the tsunami but with her additional work they became much more pronounced. At first, Ozeki decided the book she had written prior to the tsunami "just wasn't relevant anymore," (Stanford). Eventually Ozeki decided to include the tsunami, which completely changed the structure of the novel. As the story transitioned from one written in a world where the tsunami had not taken place to one where it was completely reshaped by the tsunami, Ozeki decided to "Take the fictional container and break it" (Stanford). This allowed her to follow her instincts and include herself as one of the main characters.

Ozeki proves that authors should be willing to search within themselves for answers when tackling difficult narrative structures. She struggled to put herself in the novel as the character who finds Nao's diary and intertwines with the teen. Speaking about the novel at the Stanford Humanities Center in 2014 Ozeki explained, "My job as a novelist is to pay attention to these sort of questions—who is it that Nao is writing to?" She tried four or five different characters to write opposite Nao, including a cast of several men and one vaguely defined, non-aged "nebulous" character. She almost did not include herself because she was worried that she might be applying metafictional and postmodern for all the wrong reasons (Wheeler Centre). However, as an Japanese American novelist with a career Ozeki was the perfect choice for the role.

away from the temple, Old Jiko continues living life in acceptance of change. She encourages her great niece Nao to live (in fact that is her last wish for Nao before Old Jiko passes). She sees the binaries of life, the ups and downs, but also reminds Nao to consider how they are all part of the same thing. Ozeki reasoned that, "I kind of look at the book as being a performance of certain aspects of zazen. For example, the proposition of dependence, or impermanence, or -no [redacted] seem like an impossible task."

Another manifestation of Ozeki's themes of uncertainty and change is laid bare in the meanings of the names of characters. One example is protagonists, Nao and Ruth. In Japanese, Ruth is either pronounced *rusu*, meaning roots, or *rusu*, meaning "not at home" or "absent" (p. 58). These are obvious binaries that somehow perfectly describe traits portrayed by the character. Nao recognizes early in her formative years that her name is a homophone 18 (e)-14 (r)

home there as her husband Oliver does. However, R

This idea of impermanence is similar to the Zeigarnik effect, a psychological study that suggests people are more likely to remember unfinished tasks than finished ones (Burke). Ozeki introduces ideas and avoids straightforward explanations. She asks her readers to accept that life can go on in uncertain and changing environments. In fact, it can even be enjoyable.

The author also creates iterations of characters through creative symbolic links. Haruki #1 (Nao's great uncle) and Haruki #2 (Nao's father) are a very direct example, with the descendent carrying on the peaceful consciousness and ~~in~~ <sup>in</sup> his predecessor. A more subtle example is the connection between Nao and one of the many tsunami victims. A man who initially seems to be an example plucked out from the barrage of internet videos describes his tumultuous life. "I have lost everything. My daughter, my son, my wife, my mother. Our house,



When Ruth finds Nao's story she mistakes it for garbage, something not worth a second glance that should be discarded immediately (p. 8). But upon further examination, there is so much there to explore. There is value: the watch could easily be sold to a collector for a small fortune, but more importantly there is value in the stories Nao and her Uncle chronicled. Ruth's quick and sw

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