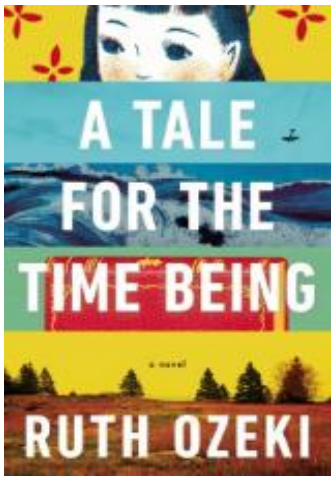
A Tale for the Time Being

by Ruth Ozeki



About the Book

?A?time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be.?

In Tokyo, 16-year-old Nao has decided there?s only one escape from her aching loneliness and her classmates? bullying. But before she ends it all, Nao first plans to document the life of her great grandmother, a Buddhist nun who?s lived more than a century. A diary is Nao?s only solace --- and will touch lives in ways she can scarcely imagine.

Across the Pacific, we meet Ruth, a novelist living on a remote island who discovers a collection of artifacts washed ashore in a Hello Kitty lunchbox --- possibly debris from the devastating 2011 tsunami. As the mystery of its contents unfolds, Ruth is pulled into the past, into Nao?s drama and her unknown fate, and forward into her own future.

Full of Ozeki?s signature humor and deeply engaged with the relationship between writer and reader, past and present, fact and fiction, quantum physics, history and myth, A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING is a brilliantly inventive, beguiling story of our shared humanity and the search for home.

Discussion Guide

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 BEINGexpresses 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 BEINGsuggest? 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 Schrodinger?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?

Author Bio

Ruth Ozeki is a novelist, filmmaker and Zen Buddhist priest. She is the bestselling author of four novels: THE BOOK OF FORM AND EMPTINESS, winner of the UK?s 2022 Women?s Prize for Fiction; MY YEAR OF MEATS; ALL OVER CREATION; and A TALE OF THE TIME BEING, which won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and was a finalist for the 2013 Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her nonfiction work includes a memoir, THE FACE: A Time Code, and the documentary film *Halving the Bones*.

A longtime Buddhist practitioner, Ruth is affiliated with the Everyday Zen Foundation. She is now professor emerita of English language and literature at Smith College, where she was the Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities.

A Tale for the Time Being

by Ruth Ozeki

Publication Date: March 12, 2013
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 432 pages
Publisher: Viking Adult
ISBN-10: 0670026638
ISBN-13: 9780670026630