

Ozeki, Ruth. *A Tale for the Time-Being*. By Alexa

Ruth Ozeki is a fictional character and wears a T-shirt to boast this (see her blog for a photo). She and her husband, Oliver, actually exist on Cortes Island, British Columbia. Ruth is a Zen Buddhist priest, writer and filmmaker, while Oliver Kellhammer is a land artist and ecological restorer.

In the novel, Ruth finds a diary, letters and a secret diary written in French in a lunchbox washed up on shore. An alternate reality of a different time and place appears in the form of Nao, a 16 year old teenager in Japan and author of this diary. These two voices form the narrative: Ruth reads the diary in the real time it would have taken to write, interspersing each entry with "moments of pause" that describe her island life, her research into the details raised in the diary and her responses to them.

Ozeki's technique of self-insertion is not new. Examples include Orhan Pamuk in *Snow* (which this club read in January of this year), JM Coetzee in *Summertime* (who questions the need for interest in the life of Coetzee), Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (regarding his Dresden experiences) and David Foster Wallace in the *Pale King* (a posthumous and unfinished text). And, of course, there is Old Jiko's lost "I" novel that was a popular genre in Japanese writing (Old Jiko being Nao's 104 year old great-grandmother and Buddhist nun).

Ironically, "Ruth" means absent, but she is very present in this novel. What sets this novel apart is that she uses her and her husband's actual names and describes their careers and lifestyles on the island. In fact, Ruth's thoughts and conversations with Oliver and other island residents seem to be taken from many moments of their lives, making the text seem more like a memoir or diary. Some readers may criticise Ruth's technique as being intrusive and contrived (see Liz Jensen's review in *The Guardian*). So what is the purpose of inserting Ruth as a character (which was actually Oliver's recommendation)?

I think it works to some extent as it enables Ozeki to do the following (though I concede that these could have been done with fictional characters just as easily):

- To give credibility to knowledge, e.g. Ruth's knowledge on zazen, i.e. Zen meditation, and Buddhist philosophy; Oliver's actual environmental problems and his struggles to plant trees not native to their area. This enables the reader to interrelate directly with the author
- To specifically examine Zen Master Dogen's theories on time beings, our awareness of time and what it is to be alive. Moreover, that everything in the universe is constantly changing and each moment is just a fingersnap
- To explore the many levels of time, where you are in time and how this affects your identity. There is the present reader contemplating the author Ruth in 2011 writing about the character of Ruth (after the tsunami) writing about Nao who had written the diary several years

earlier. For the time being, the reader is also confronted with Nao's great-uncle's story during WWII

- To enable Ozeki to respond to the kamikaze pilots in a real way, to show that there was "another way" for them to act
- To highlight the immediacy and long-lasting effects of the tsunami that has affected the Japanese for years to come, and for Ozeki having had to find out about her relatives there
- To add another voice to Nao's narration by having Ruth responding to her diary and the issues of bullying and suicide that Nao faces. This other voice also occurs in the presence of footnotes that function to add a subtext and undertone to the writing
- To explore the different identities of Ruth the writer of the novel and Ruth the character in the novel who remains static and does not continue to change and evolve as Ruth the writer does after she has completed the book. This also focuses on the two acts of narration and creation, one being performative while the other is cognitive
- To feature the manifold roles of reading and writing to underline the different time levels, the passing of time and how the reader can be lost within a story and forget the present (e.g. Ruth's urgency to save Nao and her Dad from committing suicide)
- To enable Ruth the character to rewrite the ending of the story, that is, when the words "fell off" the final pages of the diary. As Muriel tells her, the story is no longer about Nao, but about Ruth. So Ruth is able to add the lost words. This function also allows Ruth the writer to explore the idea that stories are vulnerable to going missing, to being lost forever. One example is of our not knowing Old Jiko's missing story of being an anarchist and feminist in the early 20th century, which begs the question: why are these stories missing in history?
- To change fate through actions in a dream, with Ruth the writer visiting Old Jiko's monastery - is this possible? Can you time travel in dreams?
- To illustrate quantum theory: multiple outcomes imply multiple worlds, of keeping all the possibilities of open (by not knowing what really happens to Nao), and the observer paradox: observation alters what is being observed (as in the telling of a dream)

The arguments centring on the role of writer and reader and on the static writer compared to the present writer are the strongest in favour of Ozeki including herself in her tale.

Nao's voice may grate at first - why begin the story with a teenager whose writing is not that interesting (as even Ruth comments)? What at first appear to be the self-absorbed tales of woe by a teenager evolve into serious concerns regarding the sadistic bullying she undergoes, resulting in her wish to commit suicide. But once Nao reads about her great-uncle's bullying and forced suicide, she realises that her own troubles pale into significance in comparison, which becomes an engaging parallel. Nao's diary is a further example of "hikikomori" (social withdrawal) that affects her father, and on a larger scale, computer fanatics. I therefore came to accept Nao as a necessary part of this novel in addressing topical anxieties. Nao is writing her

diary in an attempt to save her own life; her plea is a responsibility taken on by Ruth the character, and in the end she does so.

The story moves along at a reasonable pace after a slow start, and tension is heightened by Ruth the writer pushing the pause button and inserting episodes from Ruth the character's life. Unfortunately, the quantum theory explanations, given twice to ensure we get it, are an overkill and bog down the story.

Regrettably, we don't get the chance to read Old Jiko's story as Nao had initially intended. "Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans" (John Lennon). Perhaps Ozeki will be inspired to write her next novel on Old Jiko's life.

Well worth listening is an interview with Ozeki that took place at the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2013, recorded for Books + at Radio National.

*A Tale for the Time Being* was shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize. Other books by Ozeki are *Halving the Bones*, *My Year of Meats* and *All over Creation*.

My rating: 4/5