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Professor Michael Wutz

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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 co-protagonist. The experience is 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 a catastrophe that would have derailed her story if she had stuck with a more traditional narrative. Instead of succumbing to poor timing in the face of disaster, Ozeki asked herself, “How, as a fiction writer, does one respond to an event of that catastrophic magnitude?” (Stanford). She chose to ignore the historical writers adhering to “Prurient distinctions between what is fiction and what is not,” (Stanford) and developed her own hybrid notion of fiction novel writing.

I believe hew work in this area can serve as a guide for authors determining how to write during or shortly after events that shock the world. By analyzing Ozeki's themes of change and uncertainty, as well as the structural significance within her unique narrative form, novelists can identify the key successful methods that made Ozeki's experimental ideas stand out. As the world continues to experience major changes such as climate control, pandemics, and other unexpected or unwanted events, these skills will prove more important than ever before.

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 vague, non-gendered, non-aged “nebulous” character. She almost did not include herself because she was worried that she might be applying metafictional and post-modern for all the wrong reasons (Wheeler Centre). However, as a Japanese-American novelist with a cat—Ruth Ozeki was the perfect choice for the role.

One of the major thematic areas tackling change and uncertainty comes directly from Ozeki's life as a Zen Buddhist priest. Nao's great aunt, a character called Old Jiko, is a Zen Buddhist monk living at a temple in Japan. While life is uncertain and continuously changing

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 dependent co-arising, or impermanence, or no-self,” (Stanford). This message is especially powerful for people facing what may at first 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 her co-protagonists, Nao and Ruth. In Japanese, Ruth is either pronounced rutsu, 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 for the English word “now”, and she struggles for years with the shifting associations the name is tied to. These characters are not at home in their own bodies. They seem to live their lives in phases, and sometimes compartmentalize their experiences when they are especially uncomfortable. I believe Ozeki’s use of these character names signals to her readers that it is normal for people to redefine themselves in difficult times.

Ruth does not figure out how she interceded in Nao’s timeline, and she does not come face to face with her. Still, the story is set up as a conversation between two women who are trying to find their place in the world. After reading about Nao’s zazen practice, Ruth decides to try it as well. It seems likely that she was excited by Nao’s homecoming experience and was hoping to replicate the experience of awakening Nao had described. Ruth has been desperately trying to connect to the area where she lives, Desolation Point, for years but has never felt at

home there as her husband Oliver does. However, Ruth shares her true feelings about being uneasy at home when she confides “How could this be her mind awakening? It felt like boredom. It felt like what happened when the power went out. But Nao was right, it also felt like home, and she wasn’t sure she liked it,” (p 183). There is this persistence in the novel that home is more than the walls that protect us from the world outside.

It is difficult to place some of the key inciting incidents of the action in the novel. Ozeki purposefully employs this effective method to include readers in the act of investigation being played out by Ruth’s character. Many novelists consider the psychological and emotional effects their narrative creates for their readers. One example from this novel is the question of Nao’s diary arriving in Canada. It is very likely the jungle crow brought the book to the shore for Ruth to find it. In an Interview Ozeki mentioned that the tsunami bringing Nao’s treasure to the beach was one explanation. However, Ozeki carefully places many possible explanations in the narrative for the characters (and readers) to mull over. This continues throughout the book. It is a process meant to create struggle that places readers in a mindset of uncertainty. There are few defensible positions in the novel, any sure footing that would be provided by fact is changed or withheld as long as possible, yet it defiantly works as a narrative. It mirrors the act of fighting a wave, the same act Nao returns to over and over again at her Old Jiko’s encouragement.

By encouraging readers to process this book as a series of questions without promising answers, Ozeki ensures readers will interact more closely with the text. Ozeki encourages readers to draw their own connections between events in the novel. This spirit is carried out by her characters, who are generally open-minded and prepared to consider multiple possibilities of causation and outcomes in their daily lives.

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 intentions of 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, neighbors. Our whole town." While there are some parallels to Nao's father, there is not much to directly connect the men. But Ozeki has him go on to talk about the thing he is searching for: his little girl's backpack. "It's red," Nojima says. "With a picture of Hello Kitty on it. (...) That life with my family is the dream," he says. He gestures toward the ruined landscape. "This is the reality. Everything is gone. We need to wake up and understand that," (p. 111).

The missing daughter character is younger than Nao, but the specific mention of her Hello Kitty backpack ties the two together. Her father fixates on how he has lost her, which also parallels a major part of Nao's character arc. Because the story asks the reader to reframe and reconsider how the characters interact with time and space, there is a deeper connection between main characters and those who would traditionally be seen as lesser, unvoiced characters. This feeds back into the heart of Ozeki's writing process for the story. When her husband encouraged her to rewrite the story after the tsunami, he said she should "Allow reality to permeate the fictional world," (Wheeler Centre).

Another character development method Ozeki implements repeatedly to great effect throughout the novel is characters as stand ins for thought experiments. Nao is like Schrodinger's cat. Her story is stored in a Hello Kitty lunch box, which is a direct nod to Schrodinger. Before it is removed from the box, Ruth has a sense of dread. She does not know what to expect, but she does not think it will be something good. Throughout most of the story, it is unknown whether or not Nao is alive, since her state goal in the journal was to commit suicide. She is without a known place in time. Ruth does not even associate her with the past, she still considers Nao to be the same age she was in the early 2000's. However, this confusion is custom made for the narrative text. In order to exist, "now" as a concept is disembodied. It exists only when it is separate from the past and the future. Nao struggles with the temporality of her existence while exploring this idea. "...I whispered Now!...Now!...Now!...over and over, faster and faster, into the wind as the world whipped by, trying to catch the moment when the word was what it is: when now became NOW. But in the time it takes to say now, now is already over. It's already then," (p. 98).

This reference to Schrodinger's cat through Nao's character (and Ruth's cat, which is named Schrodinger in the novel but is also called "Pesto" and "Pest") is just one of many references to quantum mechanics and the many worlds interpretation. Ozeki posits that the quantum many worlds interpretation is instinctually known to many writers because writers are continually editing and rearranging the worlds in their stories (Stanford). This practice, arranging and rearranging what could happen or what may already have come to pass, can be effective when preparing for potential disaster. By sharing the creative process with readers the author can potentially teach them how to critically approach and plan for the unexpected.

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 sweeping appraisal is very much akin to the initial reactions many people take when facing the unknown. They attempt to push the catalyst of change as far away from themselves as possible. However, if Ruth never looked beyond the surface she would have lost out on an impactful, life-changing experience. Instead, a relationship unfolds in *A Tale For the Time Being* that allows Nao and Ruth to have agency over each other's lives. Their interactions seem static, but are in fact the redemptive step both women need to move on with their lives. Ozeki's message is clear: while circumstances are subject to change, the actions people take have long-lasting impact.

Often in the aftermath of a tragedy that impacts a population, writers require a period of reflection. It can be difficult to identify ways to connect to an audience while the fallout of disaster still casts a looming presence over the writers' intended message. However, Ruth Ozeki adapted *A Tale For the time Being* to battle the storms and provide her readership with valuable insight when they most needed it. These methods can be replicated and mastered. Here's a final piece of advice on adapting stories to confront change and uncertainty from Ruth Ozeki herself:

“If you can't ignore it, if you can't push it out, then you have to encompass it.”

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