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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

A Tale for the Time Being by Ruth Ozeki

Summary

In Tokyo, sixteen-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.

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 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?

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