

# Starling Days

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## Ruth Ozeki and the Zen Hybrid Novel

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# Abstract

Many years ago, I started to collect books by mixed race writers. It was an attempt to understand the stories of people like me. Yet often, they were nothing like me. The only thing we had in common was that we didn't quite belong in any other category. Some emphasized their sense of separation or of broken identity. Others described how they found links between nationalities and cultures. This thesis is comprised of a novel about characters uneasy in the categories into which they are assigned and a critical essay on how Ruth Ozeki in *A Tale for the Time Being* uses Zen Buddhism to describe a deeply connected hybrid self.

## **Part 1: Starling Days, a novel**

*Starling Days* opens on the George Washington Bridge. Mina is staring into the water when a patrol car drives up. She tries to convince the officers she's not about to jump but they don't believe her.

The novel explores the aftermath of this moment. In search of peace, Mina and her husband, Oscar, move to London. An adjunct classics professor, Mina tries to understand her failing mental health through mythology, gynecology, and her memories of her Chinese grandmother. Oscar's ability to care for her weakens as family and work begin to pressure him. As the narrative and their relationship fragment the text explores the concept of self, the taboos of mental health and the trials of holding a family together when you cannot hold onto yourself.

## **Part 2: Ruth Ozeki and the Zen Hybrid Novel**

“Ruth Ozeki and the Zen Hybrid Novel” examines how one writer uses Zen philosophy to navigate the hybridity in her work. Ozeki’s novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, models a hybridity based in the Buddhist theory of interconnectedness. Ozeki is a Japanese Caucasian American woman living in Canada and *A Tale for the Time Being* is set in Canada and Japan. Both Zen and

hybridity appear in every level of the novel—setting, character, form, and linguistic play.

First the thesis explores the history of the I-novel as a reaction to the influx of American and European forces into Japan. It then examines how Ozeki combines the I-novel with metafiction and how Ozeki uses Zen Buddhism to bridge seemingly disparate senses of self. Finally, it argues that the Zen employed by Ozeki is a hybrid Zen that draws on both Japanese and American influences distinct from a historically more nationalistic Zen. This hybrid Zen holds the book together from the way she uses individual hybrid words like ‘supapawa’ all the way out to the epitext of the promotional video.

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# Ruth Ozeki and the Zen Hybrid Novel

## Introduction

At some point, you have probably been asked to tick a box on a form. You know the ones I mean: they ask you who you are. M? F? White? Asian? Other? Career? Age bracket? Earnings? The government wants to know. Dating websites want to know. The university to which I am presenting this thesis wants to know. There's a chance one of the boxes bothered you, that the options seemed somehow limited. You probably filled it out anyway.

When I applied for a driver's licence in Wisconsin, I was told I had to choose a race—White or Asian. Which parent was I supposed to choose? The young man at the desk suggested that when I renewed my license I could change race. Over the years, it might be possible for me to be both—a racial sine wave, flexing onwards. To everyone I told this story, it seemed outrageous, but it wasn't until 2000 that the US Census deigned to accept a tick in more than one box. It wasn't until 1991 that the UK Census added the option for Mixed/Multiple Ethnicity. The last antimiscegenation laws in the United States were not repealed until 1967. The same year, NASA launched the Lunar Orbiter 3.

When a small square on a form lacks the specificity to describe an experience, one of the places it is possible to find a description of self is the novel. When boxes felt inadequate I turned to books that enacted various forms of border crossing, that enabled me as a reader to move

between and across categories, between fiction and nonfiction, between British literature and Japanese. I say border here, because so many of the categories of race and national identity function on the plane of ideas the way a wall or barrier functions on the physical—they are at once completely artificial constructions and they affect people's lives in real and tangible ways. All books are a form of border crossing. They bridge the writer's and reader's consciousnesses, identities and life experiences. All writers using the English language are drawing upon German, Greek, Latin, and French. Many use storytelling techniques that have come via the European continent from the Arabic world.<sup>1</sup> However, there is no one way in which writers find a way to cross these borders.

This paper will look at how Ruth Ozeki uses Zen Buddhist philosophy to describe hybridity in her novel *A Tale For the Time Being*. Ozeki is both a Zen Buddhist priest and a novelist. She is half Japanese, half Caucasian-American. She wrote the novel while living in both Canada and the USA. She is a self-described 'hybrid' person.<sup>2</sup> And this novel is itself a form of hybrid, it is a retelling of history, it is an I-novel, it is metafictional, it uses dream logic and it is a religious text. On a linguistic level, Ozeki blends Japanese and English within individual sentences. She creates hybrid words, with meanings derived from both Japanese and English. The characters live on different sides of the Pacific. One is mixed-race, another is a child brought back to Japan after years abroad. The novel borrows heavily from both European and American canons and traditional forms of Japanese literature. All of this is tied together using her understanding of Zen philosophy—one that has an international history and which uses words like 'supapawa'<sup>3</sup> to describe meditation.

Ozeki is not the first writer to blend forms nor is she the first to bring together Japanese,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, there is extensive literary study of Shakespeare's debt to *The Decameron* and Boccaccio's debt to Arabic storytelling traditions.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Ozeki, "Ozeki Interview," Appendix, v.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2013), 176.

American, and European literature. The poet Sadakichi Hartmaan began to publish his work at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Hartmann—who was half Japanese, half German and a resident of the United States of America at time of his death—spent time with and learned from Walt Whitman.<sup>4</sup> His use of natural and nautical images echoes Whitman's.<sup>5</sup> But he also wrote tanka and haiku—Japanese poetic forms. Indeed, he wrote an essay 'The Japanese Conception of Poetry,' in which he tried to explain haiku to an English-speaking audience.<sup>6</sup> The self he presented was fluxing. He published under many pseudonyms some of which indicated Caucasian heritage and others of which exposed his mixed-race side. He costumed himself in suits or kimono depending on the persona he wished to project and was even cast as a turbaned court magician in Douglas Fairbank's *The Thief of Bagdad*. He was celebrated for his difference but was often seen as unique or separate because of it. Gertrude Stein is supposed to have announced that, 'Sadakichi is singular, never plural.'<sup>7</sup>

Ozeki, despite all that she has in common with Hartmaan, offers a very different sense of hybrid self. Like Hartmaan she draws on Japanese, European, and American literature. But she adds to this another element: her Zen beliefs. Using these Zen beliefs she constructs a literary identity focused not on singularity but on connectedness. This paper will show how Ozeki uses her beliefs to combine the sincere I-novel form with the often ironical tradition of metafiction. At the core of Ozeki's novel is both a hybrid self and a Buddhist self and for Ozeki these are deeply intertwined.

The paper will begin with the history behind Ozeki's writing. Chapter One will discuss the history of the I-novel. When Ozeki first mentioned *A Tale for the Time Being* in 2011, she called it, *A Tale for the Time Being: An I-novel*. The I-novel is a hybrid form that was popular in

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<sup>4</sup> Floyd Cheung, "Introduction," *Collected Poems 1886–1944*, ed. Sadakichi Hartman (London: Little Island Press 2016), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Cheung, "Introduction," 9.

<sup>6</sup> Hartman, "The Japanese Conception of Poetry," *The Reader* 3 (1904): 185–191.

<sup>7</sup> Cheung, "Introduction," 7.

Japan in the early part of the twentieth century, a period when Japan was coping with an unprecedented exposure to Western culture. But by the time Ozeki's book was published, it had transformed into *A Tale for the Time Being: A Novel*. Yet, the ideas of self as understood in the I-novel remained integral to the book. The I-novel is both an extremely Japanese form and an extremely hybrid form. During the early half of the twentieth century, the I-novel rose to popularity in Japan. It is a form with no exact equivalent elsewhere, as it sprung from the particular pressures the country was under at the time. After Commodore Perry forced open Tokyo harbor to international trade, Japanese writers suddenly had access to European and American novels. This meeting created multiple literary movements. The I-novel arose from the meeting between novels that focused on individual characters, such as *Madame Bovary*, with traditional Japanese forms such as the nikki. The new form was built upon philosophical ideas about what it meant to be sincere, an individual, and Japanese. This chapter will trace the I-novel's hybrid history, while also identifying exactly what makes something an I-novel. This will establish the hybrid roots both of Ozeki's novel and of the way she presents ideas of self within the novel.

Chapter Two will examine Ozeki's presentation of the authorial self. She is both influenced by the I-novel and by metafiction in the style of Vladimir Nabokov and Muriel Spark. In other words, Ozeki makes a hybrid of two different semi-autobiographical forms. These two ways of presenting an author stand-in at first seem contradictory. The Japanese I-novel is characterised by ideas of sincerity, while metafiction is usually understood to be ironic. But Ozeki combines both forms with a Buddhist understanding of the self. This Buddhist understanding is another form of hybrid self. Ozeki is a disciple of a line of Buddhism which came from Japan but flourished in California. So we are able to see how Zen allows Ozeki to work with two seemingly opposed literary forms to create a new literary self.

Chapter Three will provide a short history of Zen moving from Zen nationalism during the pre-War and War periods to an international and fashionable Zen in the 1950's. We will see

how Ozeki's conceptions of Zen are particularly informed by Zen's hybrid history. And we will see how she uses this Zen to frame *A Tale for the Time Being* both in the book itself and in its epitext to create a hybrid rather than nationalistic Zen.

### **A note on terms**

This paper will embrace Ozeki's use of the label 'hybridity'. Hybridity does not specify nation or race or city, but instead is defined by the crossing of categories. 'Hybrid' shall be used to encompass blending, crossing between, patching together, and creating new ideas from seemingly disparate categories. The term is capacious. It can refer to the blending of literary techniques<sup>8</sup> or to an identity a person claims.

The word hybrid has a contentious past. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* proposes that hybridity forms a "Third Space with political potential to open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity."<sup>9</sup> In other words, for Bhabha hybridity challenges ideas of purity, indeed it challenges any form of fixed identity. But other critics object to the term. Robert Young points out that hybridity's etymological botanical roots imply the "forcing together of any unlike living things, grafting a vine or a rose on to a different root stock."<sup>10</sup> The term has been used as a slur. In *The Idea of English Ethnicity*, Young records the noxious views of certain nineteenth-century thinkers. For example, Fredric Farrar claimed a hybrid person is "a blot on creation, the product of a sin against nature."<sup>11</sup>

This thesis argues that to try to divorce concepts of border crossing from a troubled past

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<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Translated by Carly Emerson and Michael Holmquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press), Kindle Location 4279.

<sup>9</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), Kindle Locations 1326–1332.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Young, "The Cultural Politics of Hybridity," *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft (London: Routledge, 2006), 158.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 154.

entirely would belie the history which has made those crossings so difficult. And by attending to the way it is used by writers like Ruth Ozeki about themselves and their own work, we may be able to discover new modes of hybridity. She is not claiming to be a sin against nature. She is claiming an identity based around mixing, remixing, and criss-crossing, and this is apparent in the work she writes.

There are terms other than hybridity that could also be applied to Ozeki's work and the work of those who cross borders—Transnational,<sup>12</sup> mixed race,<sup>13</sup> Cosmopolitan,<sup>14</sup> intertextual. Each has its own remit. Transnational finds its focus in the nation, mixed race studies examine the ways in which racial mixing and miscegenation have been understood, and Cosmopolitan studies focus on the city, while intertextual emphasizes textual crossings rather than on the identity of the author. The terms place their linguistic weight heavily on a particular category.

While Cosmopolitan would apply to parts of *A Tale for the Time Being*, it would miss other portions entirely. The novel is set partially in Tokyo—a vast cosmopolitan centre—and partially on a small Canadian island far from any bustling capital. Rather than focusing on the city as the geography of connection, it is the ocean that provides the meeting point between Ozeki's central protagonists. This paper will use the term mixed race to describe how some writers, including Ozeki, identify, but Ozeki's novel does not have a racial identity and this term would lead to a

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<sup>12</sup> See Bill Ashcroft's essay "Transnation" in which he defines the transnation as "a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who live in between the categories." In *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. C. Sandru, S. L. Welsh, & J. Wilson (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 72–85.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Mixed Race' Studies: *A Reader* edited by Jayne O. Ifekwungwe for a good overview of the complications inherent in the mixed race identity, from the historical treatment of miscegenation to an interrogation of "passing" to different ways for the census to handle identity. See also Will Harris's *Mixed-Race Superman*, a text that both celebrates mixed-race identity and questions the roles mixed-race individuals are assigned in society. Jayne O. Ifekwungwe, *Mixed Race' Studies, A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004); Will Harris, *Mixed-Race Superman* (London: Peninsula Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> See Robert Spencer's *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature*, for his analysis of how a Cosmopolitan world view can provide an ethical framework to address global problems. Robert Spencer, *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

reading that focused mostly on the racial identity of the author and characters rather than the border crossing of language and literary tradition. The lens of Transnationalism could be applied to *A Tale for the Time Being*. Ozeki's work certainly involves more than one nation state. It is set in two countries. In 2013, Ozeki's novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker. At the time, only writers from Commonwealth countries were eligible. Although Ozeki does not self-describe as Canadian, her residence in Canada qualified her. However, the word Transnationalism places its focus very heavily on the nation-state.<sup>15</sup> While this paper will deal with the book's national literary cultures, it will also look at racial identities which do not perfectly align with national ones, and will look at the mixing of languages and literary techniques, all of which link to, but are not defined by, the nation-state. *A Tale for the Time Being* is certainly intertextual, however to use this word as the primary pillar of this paper would miss both the national borders her work attempts to cross and the larger argument of how Ozeki is modelling the self. And so hybridity, with all the approval and criticism it has garnered, is the term this paper will use.

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<sup>15</sup> Shameem Black uses Transnationalism to discuss one of Ozeki's earlier works, *My Year of Meats*, in her essay "Fertile Cosmofeminism: Ruth L. Ozeki and Transnational Reproduction," *Meridians* 5, no. 1 (2004): 226–256. Black focuses on the interrelation of American and Japanese power structures, with a particular focus on female identity.

# Chapter One

## The I-novel

In 2011, Ruth Ozeki published a note describing the book she planned to write—*A Tale for the Time Being: An I-novel*.<sup>16</sup> Some of her fans may have been confused. What is an I-novel? The answer is complicated and rooted in the political relations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Until 1853, Japan was closed to the West, engaging only in limited trade. Japanese writers did not have European or American novels available to them. Cross-cultural interaction was largely forbidden.<sup>17</sup> This changed when Commodore Perry forced open Japan's borders in July of 1853. There was still a strong anti-foreign resistance coming from the Shogunate. In 1868, when the Shogunate was overthrown and the Meiji Era began, a wider openness and interest in foreign ideas started to spread.<sup>18</sup> Japanese students received government sponsorship to study abroad, and an effort was made to translate works of European and American literature.

Often cultural ideas travel incrementally, but in this case non-Japanese ideas steamed into the country. The cultural shift was dramatic. Japanese writers were not only reading and translating the work of Europeans, writing in Japan began to change. Japanese writers responded to the forms of literature that were newly available to them. Previously, the focus of serious literature was poetry and historical writing. Fiction was often considered “appropriate for

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<sup>16</sup> Ruth Ozeki, “A note on A Tale for the Time Being (an I-novel),” accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.kinokuniya.com.sg/membersite/193b6aa296dae0c75d66f8ae79193d760317/byRuthOzeki.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> There were some exceptions, notably the Dutch trading post of Dejima. However, there was a strong effort to keep out foreign influences.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Gordon provides a detailed description of this period in *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

women, children, and the lower classes.”<sup>19</sup> But the association of the novel with modernity and the power of these foreign forces created a new interest in fiction. This was part of a wider interest in how European and American ideas might be integrated into Japanese society. This resulted in items such as a bowler hat made of rattan bamboo basketry.<sup>20</sup> Japanese writers were studying and exploring English, French, German, and American literature. One of the responses was *Shizenshugi*, the Japanese Naturalist movement. In reaction to the work of European writers such as Tolstoy, Zola, and Flaubert<sup>21</sup> in the early twentieth century, Japanese writers began to write long prose works dealing with the lives of everyday people. Translator and Professor of Japanese literature Jay Rubin credits Japanese Naturalist Natsume Sōseki’s<sup>22</sup> style to his study of non-Japanese culture. Rubin describes Sōseki as “a scholar who began to write his own fiction after a wide-ranging study of Western literature, aesthetics, and psychology.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, his style developed as a response to cultural forces beyond Japanese borders.

Although inspired by contact with European novels—Japanese naturalism is distinct from European Naturalism and developed its own traits. In the words of Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Rather than the pitiless, objective, ‘scientific’ tone and wide lens of European naturalists as they turned their gaze on society’s seamier areas, Japanese naturalists concentrated on small-scale perversions.”<sup>24</sup> Orbaugh argues that although these perversions might seem small, they were “a break indeed from the moralizing didacticism of pre-modern prose.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, they

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<sup>19</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh, “The Problem of the Modern Subject,” *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Hayakawa Shōkosai I’s bowler hat is now part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>21</sup> Orbaugh, “The Problem of the Modern Subject,” 31.

<sup>22</sup> Sōseki was no minor figure. His writing was so lauded that his face graced the 1,000 yen note. In 2014, his books, diaries, and belongings were shown in the Japanese Embassy in London in an exhibit entitled: *NATSUME SOSEKI: The Greatest Modern Japanese Novelist*.

<sup>23</sup> Rubin, “Sanshirō and Sōseki,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1976): 149.

<sup>24</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Naturalism and the Emergence of the Shishōsetsu,” *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 139.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 139

were using this form garnered from European sources to address their own literary and cultural traditions.

The I-novel is distinct from other forms of Japanese Naturalism because the I-novel focuses on protagonists who bear a strong resemblance to their authors. The I-novel is neither memoir nor pure fiction. As Fowler notes, “Supposedly a fictional narrative, it often reads more like a private journal. It has a reputation of being true, to a fault, to ‘real life’; yet it frequently strays from the author’s experience it allegedly portrays so faithfully.”<sup>26</sup> Whether or not the details are actually autobiographical, the power of the narrative arises in great part from the reader’s perception of a particularly strong link between the protagonist and the author. While a memoir is traditionally understood to be a recording of an author’s life, critics have come to define the I-novel as a novel that the reader *perceives* to be a recording of the author’s life. There is a subtle, but important, distinction here. The involvement of the reader in this definition means that, in the words of Tomi Suzuki, “Any novel can become an I-novel if read in this mode.”<sup>27</sup> The I-novel didn’t just require writers to adapt to new ways of storytelling; it required readers to do the same.

The term I-novel is a translation of the Japanese 私小說 *shishōsetsu* (or *watakushi shōsetsu*), which is a translation of the *Ich-Roman*. 私 means “I” when pronounced “watakushi”, or means something like “personal” or “private” when pronounced “shi” and parallels the “Ich” of *Ich-roman*. 小說, *shōsetsu*, is a word that was coined to describe the Western novel, which Japanese writers encountered for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> The form’s very name is hybrid. It took a linguistic criss-crossing to find a way to describe what these writers were doing.

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Tomi Suzuki, *Narrating the Self, Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, 45.

These writers weren't just mimicking the European or American novel. Although Japan did not have Flaubert or Dickens, the country did have a powerful literary tradition. The I-novel formed a hybrid between this tradition and the non-Japanese novels. Those looking for a Japanese antecedent cite the nikki. As Miller noted, "The nikki have been a major factor in the ease with which the Japanese assimilated the Western literary tradition of fictional literature."<sup>29</sup> Roughly translated as "a diary or memoir," nikki interleaved prose with poetry. The poems were not only by the author, but also those received in letter exchanges. The author of the nikki would create a collection. The nikki were written "with an unusually personal stamp, creating a body of works which greatly influenced later writers of prose and poetry."<sup>30</sup> It is this tradition, with its focus on the personal life but whose flavour was so often distinctly literary and lyrical, that is often seen as a forerunner to the I-novel. The combining of interiority as presented in the fictional characters in non-Japanese novels with the nikki created the conditions from which the I-novel was born.

So how exactly did this interiority manifest? I-novels typically employ three means of seduction: the use of autobiographical detail; an emphasis on the inner life of the protagonist-writer; and a seeming sincerity of emotion that often falls into a confessional mode.

### **Autobiographical Detail**

A typical I-novel echoes the facts of the author's life. As the I-novel was taking shape in the 1910s and 1920s Japan's literary class was tightly knit and numbered only in the thousands. The contemporaneous reader "would recognize the authorial persona in any story regardless of the main character's (or narrator's) name or situation."<sup>31</sup> The form became so well established that

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<sup>29</sup> Marilyn Jeanne Miller, "Nikki bungaku—Literary Diaries: Their Tradition and Their Influence on Modern Japanese Fiction," *World Literature Today* (1987): 208.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, "Nikki bungaku - Literary Diaries," 207.

<sup>31</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, xxv.

by the end of the 1920s, even when the reader did not specifically know the facts of the author's life, they could "be counted on to *assume* a connection between the author and his or her protagonist unless given obvious clues to the contrary."<sup>32</sup>

A typical example of a book that was received in this way is Natsume Sōseki's *Grass on the Wayside*. Despite the fact that the protagonist is called Kenzō and the novel dips into the mind of his wife, *Grass on the Wayside* is an I-novel. Readers would have understood that there might be subtle differences between Sōseki's and Kenzō's lives. But autobiographical details would have allowed them to draw the connection between the two. So close is the identification between author and character that in his introduction to *Grass on The Wayside*, Sōseki authority Edwin McClellan almost interchangeably interweaves the name of the character and the name of the author: for example, "Kenzō (the name Sōseki gives himself) is at this time in his middle thirties, and his wife is in her middle twenties. It was then presumably, that relations between Sōseki and his wife became strained."<sup>33</sup> Many of Sōseki's readers would have made the same leap.

By the time he wrote *Grass on the Wayside*, Sōseki was a well-known figure. Written in 1915, the novel was the final achievement of his long and successful career. The book, described by Iwamoto in his review as, "an autobiographical novel dealing with a brief but troubled period in the author's life shortly after his return from a dismal two-year study trip to England,"<sup>34</sup> contained details that were public information and, because of Sōseki's celebrity, widely known. Like Kenzō, Sōseki had "a very good degree in English Literature" and in 1909 "the government [had] sent him to England so that he might improve his knowledge of English."<sup>35</sup> There was a further link that, though perhaps less well known, was crucial. The novel traces the awkward relations between Kenzō and Shimada, a man who was briefly his adopted father; Kenzō has to

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<sup>32</sup> Orbaugh, "Naturalism and the Emergence of the Shishōsetsu," 139.

<sup>33</sup> Edwin McClellan, "Introduction," in Natsume Sōseki, *Grass on the Wayside*, trans. Edwin McClellan (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), ix.

<sup>34</sup> Yoshio Iwamoto, "Review: *Grass on the Wayside*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 30 (1970): 258.

<sup>35</sup> McClellan, "Introduction," viii.

cope with having been returned to his family. This is the fictional version of an actual trauma: Sōseki's parents "gave the baby [Sōseki] away to a childless couple whom they knew well,"<sup>36</sup> however, "there was some trouble between them, so it was arranged [Sōseki] should be returned."<sup>37</sup>

The appearance of biographical detail is an identifying marker that a book might be an I-novel. However, the literal transcribing of life events is not the point, which is why it is possible to change the name Sōseki to Kenzō. It was not ultimately the biographical details that mattered, but the intimacy these revelations created.

### The Inner Life

The fascination for readers lay in the fact that "the convention of the author as an actor who played himself had the effect of drawing the reader closer to the narrator-hero."<sup>38</sup> This intimacy led to an intense focus on the inner life of the narrator. Many writers believed the I-novel allowed them to examine the self in a way that the ordinary novel could not. Novelist Uno Kōji saw the I-novel as the depiction of the "deepest self" (最も深い私, *mottomo fukai watakushi*, literally the most profound self. Note that the 私 is the character for I or self and is the same as the last character of shishōsetsu).<sup>39</sup> Kume Masao felt that the I-novel was superior to the ordinary novel because of its focus on self without "pretense and disguise."<sup>40</sup>

Not all critics saw this as a good thing. In 1924, the journalist Nakamura Murao complained about a literary trend he described as the "State-of-Mind Novel" in which authors

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., i.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, xxv.

<sup>39</sup> Suzuki, *Narrating the Self, Fictions of Japanese Modernity*, 51.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Later I-novelists would play with both pretense and disguise. But it is important to note that this was what was valued as the I-novel came to prominence.

focused on the “workings of their minds rather than about people or life.”<sup>42</sup> This complaint was taken up by other critics of the I-novel. Defenders of the form celebrated this turn towards the self. In 1930, Kume Masao contended, “The form...expresses this ‘self’ directly and frankly, without pretense and disguise, that is to say, the I-novel, should become the main path, the basis and the essence of the art of prose.”<sup>43</sup> While a reader bathed in the waters of late twentieth-century post-modernism might question the premise of a true self, in the early twentieth century it was widely accepted that there was a essential self that might be illuminated or concealed.

Although Sōseki’s/Kenzō’s adoption and re-adoption might seem ideal material for high drama, Sōseki does not render them in this way. Instead he focuses on Kenzō’s character. The majority of *Grass on the Wayside* is consumed by awkward exchanges between Kenzō and Shimada (the man who had adopted him), and small squabbles between Kenzō and his wife. At the end of the book, the situation is much as it was in the beginning; Kenzō does not feel affairs have been resolved. In his words, “Hardly anything in this life is settled. Things that happen once will go on happening.”<sup>44</sup>

The fact that the I-novel was characterised by introspection rather than action frustrated some authors. Kenzaburō Ōe, winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature, complained that “The ‘I-novel’ merely discloses, in a repetitive manner, the life the writer is living at the moment he is penning his novel.”<sup>45</sup> Ōe describes the tedium of I-novel writing as a description along the lines of, “This is how I am writing this novel as I am writing this novel.”<sup>46</sup> Although Ōe dismisses the I-novel, he is correct to point out that most I-novels depict the protagonist writing, or struggling to write. For example this is how Sōseki describes his protagonist. “He needed time to think, to write the kind of things he wanted to write. His mind no longer knew what it was

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<sup>42</sup> Suzuki, *Narrating the Self, Fictions of Japanese Modernity*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>44</sup> Sōseki, *Grass on the Wayside*, 169.

<sup>45</sup> Ōe Kenzaburō, “An Attempt at Self-Discovery in the Mythic Universe of the Novel,” *World Literature Today* (Winter, 2002): 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

like to rest.”<sup>47</sup> Shimao Toshio’s protagonist, similarly, is a writer and is described as such: “Since I had no special skills, I had no other recourse than to look for an editor who would commission me to write a story.”<sup>48</sup> While writers like Paul Auster or John Fowles might draw attention to the act of writing in order to draw our attention to the artifice of the novelistic endeavor, at least for early practitioners the examination of the minutiae of writing was seen to add a sense of veracity to the I-novel. And it was this veracity and sincerity that was supposed to reveal the deepest self.<sup>49</sup>

### Sincerity

One of the results of this focus on the deepest self is that the I-novel’s value was often evaluated in terms of how sincere it appeared to be. Candor or authentic emotion were seen to be markers of this sincerity. In 1919, Kikuchi Kan claimed that “A writer will be successful as long as he describes his thoughts and feelings sincerely and faithfully... The worst possible thing is to... write about what one has never seen or felt.”<sup>50</sup> For those who accepted this approach to the I-novel, “the authentic transcription of the author’s feelings [became] the paramount aim of writing, and the correct identification of... those feelings becomes the chief task of the writer/critic.”<sup>51</sup> In much the same way a lover might wish the beloved to show his “true self,” readers of the I-novel were searching for a sense of intimacy with the writer that was found through this self-revelation. How do we decide if a lover is showing us their true self? How do we distinguish genuine emotion from false?

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<sup>47</sup> Sōseki, *Grass on the Wayside*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Shimao Toshio, *The Sting of Death*, trans. Kathryn Sparling (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2004), 71.

<sup>49</sup> Contemporary Japanese writers like Minae Mizumura and Hitomi Kanehara engage with both traditions, playing sincerity against artifice.

<sup>50</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, 48.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 65.

Many writers demonstrated this sincerity by an unflinching depiction of a flawed self. Kenzō's dithering is inflected by constant self-criticism: "He was aware of his own capriciousness."<sup>52</sup> He is a difficult character who finds it hard to get on with others: "Many people who knew Kenzō said he was suffering from some kind of nervous breakdown. But he believed that it was simply his nature to behave this way."<sup>53</sup> This isn't exactly a flattering portrait to write of the author stand-in. And so by writing it, Sōseki appears to be being candid with his reader.

An even more striking example of self-revelation is Shimao Toshio's *The Sting of Death*, which features a protagonist called Toshio and a wife called Miho (Toshio's wife's actual name). It features other autobiographical details that make it unmistakably part of the I-novel form. For example, Toshio suffered from a mild form of tuberculosis, as does the husband in *The Sting of Death*.<sup>54</sup> But the event in the author's life that seems to have inspired *The Sting of Death* is that of Shimao's real wife's intense mental distress, possibly caused by her husband's unfaithfulness (mirrored in the novel). *The Sting of Death* details their acute marital unhappiness. At one point, the protagonist Toshio struggles with writing because, "In order to write, I had to stick my head once more into tangles of personal relations... Assuming I did manage to write something, it was clear that every word of that concrete verbal expression would produce a violent reaction in my wife."<sup>55</sup> *The Sting of Death* emphasises how his wife hides her distress in front of strangers, as does Toshio. Yet it is this very distress which forms the material of *The Sting of Death*. Thus the book seems to offer the reader the intimate confession one might normally only exchange with the closest of friends. Novelist Toshio is confiding in his readers the very secret he goes to such effort to conceal from his neighbours.

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<sup>52</sup> Sōseki, *Grass on the Wayside*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>54</sup> Toshio, *The Sting of Death*, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 4.

As the I-novel's "appeal rested... on its aura of sincerity and epistemological validity,"<sup>56</sup> it is the quality that has been most examined. That examination led some critics to the conclusion that an aura of sincerity is not the same as true sincerity. Masao Miyoshi described the I-novel as "an incredible fabrication that is constantly held up as truthful."<sup>57</sup> More neutrally, Orbaugh points out that many writers, "clearly crafted their narratives for maximum literary effect; although the surface may have appeared simple and unmediated, closer reading revealed obvious authorial sculpting."<sup>58</sup> Such criticisms highlight the impossibility of presenting a true and unconstructed authorial self. However, rather than negating the existence of the I-novel, this allows us to refine our understanding of what it is. Since sincerity cannot be measured and what appears to be sincere to one reader may not appear so to another, some critics have argued that the I-novel cannot be defined in terms of objective qualities. Instead, it is defined by its reception.

Suzuki claims that an I-novel is not truly defined by autobiographical detail or sincerity but by the act of being read and interpreted as an I-novel. What makes an I-novel is not just the book itself but the relationship between the author and the readers. Though even this can prove a complicated way of defining the genre. In 2002 Kenzaburō Ōe wrote that, "When a Japanese writer chooses to use a first-person narrator and begins to tell about a topic that has to do with his personal life, and the reader is already familiar with this writer to some extent, the reader does not doubt that it is an 'I-novel' he or she is about to read."<sup>59</sup> Ōe felt this pressure so strongly that when he wrote his novel *A Personal Matter* in 1964, he felt that he "had to enter into a new contract with [his] readers, first proclaiming to them that what they were about to read was not an 'I-novel'."<sup>60</sup> Despite his protests, Ōe is one of the writers Fowler describes as an I-novelist,

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<sup>56</sup> Orbaugh, "The Problem of the Modern Subject," 32.

<sup>57</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, 64.

<sup>58</sup> Orbaugh, "Naturalism and the Emergence of the Shishōsetsu," 138.

<sup>59</sup> Ōe, "An Attempt at Self-Discovery in the Mythic Universe of the Novel," 9.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

“although he himself would no doubt recoil at the characterization.”<sup>61</sup> If we agree that the reader’s belief that a novel is an I-novel makes it one, Fowler’s reading of Ōe as an I-novelist makes him one. Then again, Orbaugh contends that “Ōe is in no sense a *shishosetsu*...writer.”<sup>62</sup> One foot in. One foot out. Categorising what is and is not an I-novel only becomes more complex as the form stretches to accommodate new material. As later writers play more and more with the form, its boundaries shift, making it even harder to identify. As a form it is forever between categories, not quite fiction, not quite nonfiction, both Japanese and not.

### **The Future of the I-novel**

The debate over the value of the I-novel (and what exactly it is) has been present since the form’s inception, and the notion of what can and cannot be an I-novel has continued to shift. Fowler suggests that “Most [critics] argue that it has undergone a transformation... that has been variously described as ‘fictionalising’ or ‘distorting’ of the form.”<sup>63</sup> For example, Toshio Shimao’s work with the form between the 1960s and 1980s often gives dreams and scenes of madness equal weight to the lived events of the story: he creates a “sophisticated blend of the real and the surreal, as if a gossamer veil were thrown over the I-novel.”<sup>64</sup> Fujieda Shizuo’s I-novel *In Search of the Pure Land* has the narrator die. But Fowler believes these works are still I-novels because the I-novel is not a memoir but a display of “candor.”<sup>65</sup>

Contemporary writers are able to use the I-novel to play games with their readers about what it might or might not be. For example, *A True Novel* (ほんかくしようせつ—Honkaku *Shōsetsu*) is a pun; *shōsetsu* (“novel”) is the same *shōsetsu* as in *watakushi shōsetsu* (“I-novel”), while

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<sup>61</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, 295.

<sup>62</sup> Sharaly Orbaugh, “Ōe Kenzburō,” *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 199.

<sup>63</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, 292.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Gabriel, *Mad Wives and Island Dreams: Shimao Toshio and the Margins of Japanese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 90.

<sup>65</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, 297.

*Honkaku* can be translated as either “true” or “genuine.” Mizumura actually describes her narrator considering the form of the I-novel:

What exactly is an “I-novel”? In an “I-novel,” readers expect the writer to figure in the work in one way or another. Whether the work is in fact based on the writer’s life or is a contrivance is ultimately irrelevant. The author-protagonist of an “I-novel” is perceived as an actual, specific individual, one whose face may be publicly known in other media. The work is necessarily assumed to be truthful about that individual’s life.<sup>66</sup>

Writing in the twenty-first century, Minae Mizumura has the benefit of almost a hundred years of scholarship and can play with the fact that it is the reader’s identification of the author with the protagonist, rather than an actual similarity, that makes the I-novel what it is. Her explanation and the expectation that many of her Japanese readers would be familiar with the form allow her to play with the I-novel and its implications.<sup>67</sup> The narrator argues that her work is not an I-novel, because the main subject of the novel is a man she once met, not the narrator herself. However, very quickly the reader discovers that, on the contrary, the novel is about the narrator, her family and the moral choices that she makes, giving it all the appearance of the I-novel.

While Ōe fought the I-novel, another contemporary Japanese writer Hitomi Kanehara took a more playful approach. When she published *Snakes and Earrings*, a novel about a sexually deviant teenager, the media “made much of her personal history, and similarities between author and protagonist.”<sup>68</sup> Her next novel, *Autofiction*, centres on a protagonist who is a novelist. As in

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<sup>66</sup> Mizumura, *A True Novel* (New York: Other Press, 2013), 159.

<sup>67</sup> After all as Mizumura/her protagonist says, “‘I-novels’ continue to flourish.” (pg. 158.)

<sup>68</sup> Rachel DiNitto, “Between Literature and Subculture: Kanehara Hitomi, Media Commodification and the Desire for Agency in Post-Bubble Japan,” *Japan Forum* (2011): 459.

an I-novel we see this character writing and struggling to write: “I sit down at my computer, wrought with frustration. I turn it on and click the document I’m working on. But it’s happening all over again—all I can see are blocks of text!”<sup>69</sup> She is a young Japanese woman of roughly Kanehara’s age. And soon other similarities emerge. Like Kanehara, she has already written a novel which the press treated as autobiographical. “I’m rapidly getting tired of interviewers who refuse to recognize the difference between me and the character in my novel.”<sup>70</sup> Having established the similarity, Kanehara plays with the reader’s expectations. The character’s editor requests that she write an autobiographical novel. She asks what he means and he says, “It’s autobiography-style fiction. A work of fiction that gets the reader suspecting that it’s actually an autobiography.”<sup>71</sup> When she asks if that means she should write about her childhood in the sanatorium, the editor agrees happily. Then she reveals that actually she didn’t spend her childhood in a sanatorium. But the editor doesn’t care—he knew that already. It is the appearance of autobiography that matters more than biography. Throughout the novel, the protagonist questions even the possibility of truth: “So I’m sitting here thinking things that aren’t even true. No, actually that are true. As if it matters anyway.”<sup>72</sup> The belief in sincerity so crucial to the early I-novelists seems to have evaporated. Thus, Kanehara creates something that resembles an I-novel, but which refutes the idea of sincerity at the very centre of the conception of the I-novel. Kanehara and Mizumura are helping shape the contemporary I-novel by embracing the contradictions that were always at the heart of the genre.

### Can the I-novel leave Japan?

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<sup>69</sup> Hitomi Kanehara, *Autofiction*, trans. D. J. Karashima (London: Vintage Books, 2008), 61.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 24.

The key characteristic of the I-novel is the actual or perceived connection between the author and protagonist. Because of the strong level of identification between author and protagonist, questions arise: does the form have to be written by a certain sort of author? Does the author have to be Japanese? Do they have to be writing for a Japanese audience? For many years, the I-novel was considered by both detractors and supporters to be a quintessentially Japanese form. It also relied on a Japanese readership that recognized the signs of an I-novel. After all, if an I-novel is an I-novel because the reader believes it to be one then the reader needs to know what an I-novel is.

Many critics connected the sincerity-authenticity at the heart of the I-novel to the Japanese character. Uno Kōji argued that the Western novel was “the most natural form for Western writers to express this “self” whereas the I-novel, created out of the “deepest self,” was the most natural form for Japanese writers.”<sup>73</sup> Itō Sei felt that while “the question of the author’s self [*watakushī*] is the most essential problem in modern world literature, or literature in general,”<sup>74</sup> that the I-novel differed from novels by Europeans. Europeans expressed selfhood differently from the Japanese. He argued that European novelists required the mask of a fictional character to reveal their inner self; “by contrast the Japanese authors revealed their natural selves directly without any ‘extraction or abstraction.’”<sup>75</sup> And while a contemporary critic might wonder how the true self can ever be revealed or proven to be true, this perception of the I-novel as essentially Japanese continues in modern criticism. In explaining the I-novel, Orbaugh writes, “advocates of the *shishōsetsu* emphasized its unmediated directness and veracity, claiming that these elements had long distinguished **Japanese**<sup>76</sup> literary forms.”<sup>77</sup> Not only is it typical of Japanese literary forms but it is “considered by many the most ‘Japanese’ of literary forms.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Suzuki, *Narrating the Self*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>76</sup> Emphasis my own.

<sup>77</sup> Orbaugh, “Naturalism and the Emergence of the *Shishōsetsu*,” 138.

<sup>78</sup> Orbaugh, “The Problem of the Modern Subject,” 32.

According to Tomi Suzuki, the sense that it taps into something specifically Japanese “remains one of the most widely accepted characterizations of the I-novel.”<sup>79</sup>

Yet the characteristics of the I-novel are not fixed. For example, in the 1910s and 1920s it was perceived to be an art form solely within the male domain. At first many male Japanese critics felt that women were incapable of the interiority required for Naturalist art. Even in theatre there were concerns about whether Japanese women could successfully display adequate interiority to be actresses. Indra Levy writes of the concerns of male Japanese critics in the early twentieth century, that “the typical Japanese woman is nothing but a set of conventions, so strictly bound to their forms that she either possesses no interiority to speak of or that interiority is so deeply submerged beneath the thick layers of socially encoded femininity as to be irretrievable for the purposes of Naturalist art.”<sup>80</sup> And thus what the Japanese termed naturalist art was largely dominated by men until female writers (and actresses) began to prove they too could engage in this depiction of an emotional and individual self.

Fowler explains that he includes only examples by male writers in *The Rhetoric of Confession* because “the energies of prominent female writers working in the 1910s and the 1920s (such as Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō) were devoted as much to feminist causes as they were to literary production.”<sup>81</sup> This becomes complicated once one is aware of Raichō’s literary production. Raichō founded a literary magazine called *Seitō*; the act of its foundation was indeed political—*Seitō* is a translation of the word “Bluestocking.” Her magazine was by women and for women. Jan Bardsley points out that most readers of *Seitō* “were probably inclined to read the stories in *Seitō*, especially those with a first-person narrator or prominent female character, as autobiography.”<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, many *Seitō* authors were “influenced by the vogue for personal

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<sup>79</sup> Suzuki, *Narrating the Self*, 51.

<sup>80</sup> Indra A. Levy, *Sirens of the Western Shore* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 240.

<sup>81</sup> Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*, xxiv.

<sup>82</sup> Jan Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Women Essays and Fiction from Seitō* (Ann

fiction and did draw on the intimate events of their lives in writing their short stories.”<sup>83</sup> This combination of autobiography and reader identification with the author through perceived autobiography seems to capture exactly the quality of the I-novel. Nonetheless, because in the 1910s and 1920s the I-novel was perceived as “men’s confessional writing”<sup>84</sup> these works are not described by either Fowler or Bardsley as I-novels. Yet by the 1930s women were writing I-novels. Hayashi Fumiko published an I-novel in 1930 that was understood as such, and Enchi Fumiko, whose first novel was published in 1939, became a prominent I-novelist. Kanehara and Mizumura are both women with successful careers playing with the I-novel. Ideas of what an I-novelist looks like are clearly capable of changing.

So could a novelist outside of Japan write an I-novel? What would it mean for a writer writing in English for an international audience to write an I-novel? Would it still be an I-novel? After all there are plenty of non-Japanese writers and thinkers who have pondered on and played with notions of the self. The category of the I-novel is, as we have seen, slippery but might an English language, I-novel be a slip too far?

All this brings us back to Ruth Ozeki’s 2013 novel *A Tale for the Time Being*. The book displays distinct I-novel characteristics but was written in the modern era, outside of Japan, by a mixed race woman. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki teaches a non-Japanese reader what an I-novel is. She draws upon I-novelistic traditions of self and sincerity, while at the same time employing European and American metafictional techniques. All of this is tied together by a Zen Buddhist philosophy that defines how Ozeki’s hybrid self is expressed. The next chapter will discuss how Ozeki creates this hybrid I-novel.

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Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two

### The Presentation of Self in *A Tale for the Time*

#### *Being*

##### ***A Tale for the Time Being: An I-novel***

In 2011, Ozeki said she intended to write a book called, *A Tale for the Time Being: An I-novel*.<sup>85</sup> But by the time it was published in 2013 in the United States, it was *A Tale for the Time Being: A Novel*. In the Japanese edition the title gave no indication as to whether it was supposed to be a novel or an I-novel. The book was published as あるときの物語 (literally “the time that is happening’s tale.”)

The book follows two protagonists. Nao, a teenage girl living in Tokyo, and Ruth, a novelist living in Canada. Nao’s narrative is a diary about her bullying, her father’s suicide attempt, and her own planned suicide. Ruth’s is an account of finding that diary washed onto the beach. Ruth reads the diary and attempts to discover more about the girl writing it. Over the course of her reading we learn more about her relationship with her husband, her mother, and her cat. At the very end of the narrative a fabulist dream traveling twist pulls the two stories together.

Why did Ozeki change the book’s name? In June 2016, I interviewed Ozeki. She told me that she made the decision, alongside her American publishers, to drop the reference to I-novel from the title “since most people don’t really know what an I-novel is, that it just seemed a little

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<sup>85</sup> Ozeki, “A note on *A Tale for the Time Being* (an I-novel).”

confusing.”<sup>86</sup>

This raises an important question. Suzuki argues that an I-novel is an I-novel when the reader believes it to be so.<sup>87</sup> If we take that definition, at first it seems impossible for *A Tale for the Time Being* to be an I-novel. In the UK and USA most readers are unaware of the form. However, readers who make it through *A Tale for the Time Being* do know what an I-novel is. The label “I-novel” does not appear on the cover, but the book teaches the reader what the I-novel is. The character Ruth goes online to access something that resembles JSTOR. Ruth “followed the link, which took her to the Web page of an online archive of scholarly journals.”<sup>88</sup> The title of the article she finds – *Japanese Shishōsetsu and the Instability of the Female I* – indicates that it is in fact central to Ozeki’s conception of *A Tale for the Time Being*.<sup>89</sup> The article about a fabricated I-novelist begins with a summary of the existing literature on the I-novel:

The term shishōsetsu, and the more formal watakushi shōsetsu, refer to a genre of Japanese autobiographical fiction, commonly translated into English as “I-novel.” Shishōsetsu flourished during the brief period of sociopolitical liberalization of the Taishō Democracy (1912–1926), and its strong resonances continue to influence literature in Japan today. Much has been said about the form, about its “confessional” style, its “transparency” of text, and the “sincerity” and “authenticity” of its authorial voice. Too, it has been cited in the blogosphere with reference to issues of truthfulness and fabrication, highlighting the tension between self-revelatory, self-concealing, and

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<sup>86</sup> Ozeki, “Ozeki Interview” Appendix, i.

<sup>87</sup> Suzuki, *Narrating the Self*, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 148.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 148.

self-effacing acts.<sup>90</sup>

Although this article is fictional, Ozeki has given a solid academic summary of the form. She goes so far as to quote Edward Fowler, a very real academic. There are obvious parallels between *A Tale for the Time Being* and the type of book being described. This allows *A Tale for the Time Being* to fulfill Suzuki's definition. By the time the reader has finished the book, it is perfectly possible for them to read it as an I-novel and thus it is possible for *A Tale for the Time Being* to be an I-novel by Suzuki's definition. The book shapes its audience.

As the last chapter made clear, the I-novel focuses on a central I figure, who resembles the novelist in some way. If we accept *A Tale for the Time Being* as an I-novel, we must ask what sort of *I* is being presented. This chapter will explore the ways in which Ozeki constructs self in *A Tale for the Time Being*, by using the traditional I-novel techniques, incorporating metafiction, and outlining a Buddhist understanding of the self.

### **The I-novel Protagonist**

The protagonists of traditional I-novels conventionally resemble their authors. The life of the author Ruth Ozeki resembles that of the character Ruth. The most obvious signal is the character's name. And in case the reader missed the reference Ozeki takes a moment to dwell on the name's meaning. "The word Ruth is derived from the Middle English *rue*, meaning remorse or regret."<sup>91</sup> This alone should be enough to draw a link between writer and protagonist. But Ozeki goes further. Before the main text begins, the *About The Author* states that "She lives in British Columbia and New York City."<sup>92</sup> Ruth, the character, lives in British Columbia and used

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>92</sup> Ozeki, "About the Author," in *A Tale for the Time Being*.

to live in New York: “They tried living together in New York, but by spring, she had again yielded to the tug and tide of his mind, allowing its currents to carry her back across the continent and wash them up on...Desolation Sound.”<sup>93</sup>

Ozeki tells us that Ruth is trying and failing to write a memoir of her mother’s battle with Alzheimer’s. Ozeki the author has never written a memoir of her mother’s Alzheimer’s, but in interviews and in *The Face: A Time Code* she revealed her mother suffered from Alzheimer’s.

Ruth the character is married to someone named Oliver. Ozeki is also married to someone named Oliver, whom she thanks in the acknowledgements: “I offer my abiding thanks to Oliver, for his love and companionship— thank you for your generous collaboration on this book and for being my partner and my inspiration in this and all our many worlds.”<sup>94</sup>

Superficially at least, the protagonist of *A Tale for the Time Being* closely resembles a traditional protagonist of an I-novel.

In addition to these autobiographical details, *A Tale for the Time Being* also draws attention to Ruth as the writer in the traditional manner of the I-novelists. “It used to be that when she’d had a good writing day, she would read aloud what she’d just written, finding that if she fell asleep thinking about the scene she was working on, she would often wake with a sense of where to go next.”<sup>95</sup> It devotes large swathes of the narrative to her interior thoughts, not only about being a writer but about her domestic relations and identity, both of which make her fit quite neatly into the role of I-novel protagonist. Just as in the traditional I-novel, the reader is invited to read this as an intimate, almost confessional, text. But unlike the traditional I-novel this book was not written for a readership expecting I-novels. Ozeki claims she came to this form only after trying a more straightforward third-person narrative.

Ozeki did not always conceive of *A Tale for the Time Being* as an I-novel and herself as a

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<sup>93</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 57.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 35.

fictional character. When trying to decide who the reader of Nao's diary should be, Ozeki tried many characters before deciding to use Ruth. "They were very different. Some of them were young; some of them were old... Male, female... A whole cast of different readers. And none of them worked!"<sup>96</sup> Early in this process, she had considered devising a writer-character named Ruth but rejected it. "It felt so self-conscious and post-modern and metafictional, and something that Boy Writers do. And so, therefore, I felt like, maybe that's not such a great idea."<sup>97</sup> It was not the idea of gender, but the idea of literary pyrotechnics for their own sake that put her off. "If it had just been the kind of razzle-dazzle metafiction for metafiction's sake... It wasn't interesting to me."<sup>98</sup> Part of this resistance may come from the fact that previous work, which she did not consider to be autobiographical, was treated by critics as if it were. In all of her fictional works, she has deployed a part-Japanese, part-Caucasian protagonist. This was not out of a desire to write an I-novel or metafiction. Ozeki was a mixed race person writing a mixed race protagonist. But the experience is very different for her than it is for a white writer writing about a white protagonist. Or even for a Japanese man writing in the 1920s in Japanese for Japanese readers. Ozeki pointed out that there is one key difference:

If I write a mixed race character, there is no way that a reader is not going to assume that that character is an autobiographical character, right? This is not a problem that a white male American writer would ever face. A white male American writer can write about a white male psychopath, and nobody is going to assume that that psychopath is him. Whereas if a mixed race female writer writes about a mixed race female psychopath, then people are going to assume that there's an

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<sup>96</sup> Ozeki, "Ozeki Interview" Appendix, ii.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., iii.

autobiographical element there, simply because of the cultural and racial specificity that the two, that the character and the author share.<sup>99</sup>

In her first novel, she rebelled against the idea of autobiography enforced by racial profile when creating her half-Japanese protagonist, by “making Jane six feet tall and giving her green hair.” As she said, “my idea was, this is so that people can tell, readers can tell me and Jane apart, right?” But readers and critics identified her with Jane. For example, academic Michael Zryd introduces it as a “quasi autobiographical novel” in his essay on “Ironic Identity Frames and Autobiographical Documentary.”<sup>100</sup> So Ozeki tried again: “In *All Over Creation*, I went out of my way to make the mixed race character, Yumi Fuller, into a flawed protagonist.” Ozeki hoped that if she made Yumi Fuller sufficiently flawed, readers wouldn’t confuse character with author. But Yumi was still seen as an Ozeki stand-in by readers and critics. This confusion is quite different from the I-novel during its Japanese boom. While that form played upon complicity between reader and writer in the conflation of protagonist and author, what Ozeki describes in her early books is the position of a writer from a racial minority—in which despite her authorial efforts, her characters are seen as representations of herself.

What brought Ozeki to deliberately choose a character as author substitute was the 2011 tsunami. Ozeki had just submitted the book to the publisher, but retracted it as it no longer felt relevant in light of the earthquake. “The earthquake and tsunami broke the world. It was a real, a very real event that caused a rift in time. And suddenly, Japan was no longer the place that it had been, right? There was a sense that there was pre-earthquake Japan, and then there was also post-earthquake Japan.”<sup>101</sup> The 1920s I-novels were written in part as the result of the forced opening of Japan. It was a time when writers questioned what it meant to be a Japanese person

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., iv.

<sup>100</sup> Michael Zryd, “Ironic Identity Frames and Autobiographical Documentary: Ruth L. Ozeki’s *Halving the Bones* and *My Year of Meat*,” *Literary Research* (2001): 120.

<sup>101</sup> Ozeki, “Ozeki Interview” Appendix, ii.

and how that should be depicted. The earthquake seemed to cause a similar need to define what a writer's role might be in chronicling the plight of the Japanese people. Murakami, in a talk given in Barcelona that year, argued that writers must play a part in rebuilding Japan:

In this great collective effort, there should be a space where those of us who specialize in words, professional writers, can be positively involved...

Professional writers took up that role in the past. We supported the rebuilding of Japan after it was reduced to scorched earth by war. We must return to that starting point again.<sup>102</sup>

Contrasting Murakami's vision of a unified Japan, Fukushima writer Furukawa Hideo saw the earthquake as a sign of how divided Japan was. *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure: A Tale That Begins with Fukushima* (*Uma tachi yo, soredemō hikari wa muku de*), published in the same year as the earthquake, weaves local myth together with personal memoir to criticise the injustice of the event. The nuclear power plants that caused so much destruction did not power Fukushima, but Tokyo, and so it is suggested that the locals of Fukushima were martyred. This provokes a meditation on the differences between official histories and unofficial histories. The blurring of genres intrigued critics. "Does Furukawa's text represent reportage, a novel, or a history? Such distinctions are beside the point. Once overwhelmed by the unprecedented reality of the disasters, his literary imagination tried to respond to it by nullifying the self-evident distinctions between the three."<sup>103</sup>

Ozeki was writing from the opposite geographic standpoint. Furukawa highlights how the earthquake affected a specific subgroup, while Ozeki was writing about its global spread.

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<sup>102</sup> Haruki Murakami, "Speaking as an Unrealistic Dreamer," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, no. 29 (2011): 6.

<sup>103</sup> Takeshi Kimoto, "Post-3/11 Literature: Two Writers from Fukushima," *World Literature Today* 86, no. 1 (2012): 18.

While Furukawa wrote from the extreme locality of a particular province of Japan, Ozeki was writing from the other side of the world. Nevertheless, they employ a similar narrative strategy, the insertion of a real event (the earthquake) and a semi-fictional self. In both cases, it locates them, as the author, in relation to the disaster—a declaration of narrative stand-point. While Furukawa is establishing himself as a local, Ozeki is placing herself as a member of the Japanese diaspora. In each case the self determines how the event is understood.

Embracing a semi-autobiographic form was the way Ozeki decided to tackle the earthquake. Ozeki claimed that, “The way to address [the disaster] was to address it directly. It was to step into the novel as a semi-real person, a semi-real character, which would allow the fictional world to *stay* broken. It would allow that schism, or that rift to persist in the fictional world.”<sup>104</sup> For Ozeki, the best way to address the breaking of the world was to break her fiction. Rather than creating a fictional universe whose disasters were of her own making, she allowed the factual earthquake into the novel she had been writing. Ozeki rewrote the book so that it could specifically address the earthquake. Ruth only finds Nao’s diary because it is washed up on ocean currents caused by the earthquake. And so the earthquake and tsunami became a narrative force within the book. By the end of the novel, when Ruth is concerned for Nao’s safety, the novel describes this very real tragedy, and thus this very real tragedy washed into the fiction. This is the character Ruth thinking: “The earthquake and the tsunami, 15,854 people died, but thousands more simply vanished, buried alive or sucked back out to sea by the outflow of the wave. Their bodies were never found.” Although this is part of the novel, seen alone it could be part of an essay or even a piece of journalism. The hard facts do not need fiction to lend them drama. Ruth ends this mental sequence with the thought, “This was the harsh reality of this world, at least.”<sup>105</sup> The word “reality” is remarkable in its placement within the fictional world. In this way, Ozeki reminds the reader that this disaster is real.

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<sup>104</sup> Ozeki, “Ozeki Interview” Appendix, iii.

<sup>105</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 400.

Once she had decided to use a protagonist who resembled the author, Ozeki was able to use the assumptions that people had made about the mixed race protagonists Jane and Yumi to further conflate herself with the Ruth character. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, for the first time she chose to work with rather than against the reader's assumption that any mixed race character must be an author substitute. Ozeki increases the sense of intimacy by giving us Ruth the character's feelings about this choice of name in the context of her family background:

Ruth's Japanese mother wasn't thinking of the English etymology when she chose the name, nor did she intend to curse her daughter with it— Ruth was simply the name of an old family friend. But even so, Ruth often felt oppressed by the sense of her name, and not just in English. In Japanese, the name was equally problematic. Japanese people can't pronounce "r" or "th." In Japanese, Ruth is either pronounced rutsu, meaning "roots," or rusu, meaning "not at home" or "absent."<sup>106</sup>

Ozeki like Ruth is the daughter of a Japanese mother. The text tempts the reader to infer that this is how she too feels about her own name. This technique is not so different from Sōseki's use of his adoption narrative in *Grass on the Wayside*, as mentioned in the last chapter, in which the reader is tempted to read Kenzō's feelings about his adoption as Sōseki's feelings about his similar situation.

### ***A Tale for the Time Being: A Metafictional Novel***

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<sup>106</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 59.

In our interview, Ozeki described her original skepticism about embracing the “metafictional razzle-dazzle” of the “boy-novelists”. But she borrows their techniques. In her words, *A Tale for the Time Being* is “a little bit more post-modern than the original Japanese I-novel is.”<sup>107</sup> What this means is that she incorporates metafictional techniques that were not employed by the early I-novelists. Critic Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”<sup>108</sup> If the I-novelist supposedly represents reality, metafiction gives us a sense of the rift between fiction and reality. While Ozeki represents the tsunami as “reality,”<sup>109</sup> the physical artifact of the book is used to draw attention to the fact that the work is still fictional.

Ozeki repeatedly reminds us of the text as artifact. Not only that but the way she does so creates a sense of rift or disjunct. While it might be possible to believe that Ozeki the novelist and Ruth the character are one person when Ruth’s writing is described, it is not possible to do this when presented with the dissonance between the way the book is represented in the text and the actual book available to the reader. The novel contains the beginning of Nao’s diary. Nao describes the fact that she’s writing in a notebook placed inside the cover of *À la recherche du temps perdu*:

I need to explain about this book you’re holding... Because when you picked it up, you thought it was a philosophical masterpiece called *À la recherche du temps perdu* by the famous French author named Marcel Proust, and not an insignificant diary by a nobody named Nao Yasutani. So it just goes to show that it’s true what they say: You can’t

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<sup>107</sup> Ozeki, “Ozeki Interview” Appendix, i–iii

<sup>108</sup> Patricia Waugh, *The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984), 2.

<sup>109</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 400.

tell a book by its cover!<sup>110</sup>

At this point in the text, the reader has not yet encountered Ruth. Further into the text, a reader could choose to imagine that the version they have is a version that the character Ruth published. But at this point, that is impossible and the reader is torn between the physical reality of what they are holding and the description. This point is re-emphasised by the two footnotes that modify this description: “stout, compact tome, perhaps a crown octavo, measuring approx. 5 x 7 ½ inches”<sup>111</sup> and “Cover is worn, made of reddish cloth. Title is embossed in tarnished gold letters on the front and again on the spine.”<sup>112</sup>

The reader does not yet know the source of the footnotes, however it is clear that the published book is not the book that is being described. The first British paperback edition of *A Tale for the Time Being* is a pale white paperback with a partially obscured girl’s face looking out of a circle. The American hardback is brightly coloured and striped and far larger than the described dimensions. The digital edition is even further removed from the description. Only the Japanese hardback remotely resembles the book described. The dust jacket is a blue paint-scape, but once that is removed a thick red cover is revealed, although it is Ozeki’s and not Proust’s name that appears. This sense of uncertainty and unreliability extends from Nao’s section to Ruth’s. After the first few entries of Nao’s diary, Ruth’s narrative begins, starting with her discovery of the diary. Ruth describes Nao’s handwriting at great length:

Her handwriting, these loopy purple marks impressed onto the page, retained her moods and anxieties, and the moment Ruth laid eyes on the page, she knew without a doubt that the girl’s fingertips were pink

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 19–20. (Lack of italicization here matches Ozeki’s text.)

<sup>111</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, Kindle Location 6429.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 6430.

and moist, and that she had bitten her nails down to the quick... They were round and a little bit sloppy (as she now imagined the girl must be, too), but they stood more or less upright and marched gamely across the page at a good clip, not in a hurry, but not dawdling, either. Sometimes at the end of a line, they crowded each other a little, like people jostling to get onto an elevator.<sup>113</sup>

The description is reproduced here in full to emphasize the sheer volume of words that Ozeki affords the description. This makes it impossible to ignore the difference between the printed or e-book text and the handwriting described. The reader is forced to confront the fact that although they have just read Nao's diary, they have *not* read Nao's diary. They have not seen this round purple handwriting. This means that the narrative must then be re-examined and questioned, adding another level of disjunct between what the text describes and the text itself. Ozeki pushes against the reader's suspension of disbelief in a way that the original I-novelists never did. Her work resonates with Linda Hutcheon's definition of metafiction as "self-referring or autorepresentational: it provides, within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception"<sup>114</sup> By describing Nao's handwriting Ozeki reminds us both of the process of narrative creation and of the fact that the origins of the narrative we are reading are fictional rather than truthful. One of the key qualities of the early I-novels was sincerity. The fact that *A Tale for the Time Being* implies that it is to be read as an I-novel yet draws attention to its own artifice is significant. What does this break into metafiction mean? We noted that one of the tropes of the I-novel is to construct a writer character and that Ozeki does this in *A Tale for the Time Being*. However, she pushes the boundary

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<sup>113</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 12.

<sup>114</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London: Methuen, 1984), xii.

of character Ruth and novelist Ozeki even further using a device not found in the I-novel of the twentieth century: the footnote. Outside of metafiction, a footnote in fiction is often evidence of a text in translation or a text which offers significant volumes of material from another culture. Sometimes these are provided by the editor, sometimes by the translator, and sometimes by the author themselves. Ozeki's footnotes serve four distinct purposes. The types set out at 1–3 below all appear to be linguistic/cultural explanations as might appear in a non-metafictional text:

1. They provide translations of Japanese terms, for example “keitai (携帯) — mobile phone.”<sup>115</sup> In a non-metafictional novel, such a note can be read as straightforward translation.

At times, the notes can be extensive:

Zuibun nagaku ikasarete itadaite orimasu ne — “I have been alive for a very long time, haven’t I?” Totally impossible to translate, but the nuance is something like: I have been caused to live by the deep conditions of the universe to which I am humbly and deeply grateful. P. Arai calls it the “gratitude tense,” and says the beauty of this grammatical construction is that “there is no finger pointing to a source.” She also says, “It is impossible to feel angry when using this tense.”<sup>116</sup>

Paula Aria is a real professor at Louisiana State University. To footnote her reference in this manner resembles an academic text more than a novel and further breaks down the barrier between fictional and nonfictional worlds.

2. They provide references for quotations: “Eihei Dōgen Zenji (1200– 1253)— Japanese Zen

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<sup>115</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, Kindle Location 6491.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 6423.

master and author of the *Shōbōgenzō* (The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye). ‘For the Time Being’ (Uji) is the eleventh chapter.”<sup>117</sup>

3. They provide Japanese historical context: “New Woman—a term used in Japan in the early 1900s to describe progressive, educated women who rejected the limitations of traditional gender-assigned roles.”<sup>118</sup>

4. They provide Ruth’s commentary on Nao’s diary. For example, “Can’t find references to medical cafés or Bedtown. Is she making this up?”<sup>119</sup>

It is in this fourth use that we see the sharpest echoes of European and American metafictionalists. Footnotes like the example above show that it is not a translator, editor, or Ozeki in the role of author writing the notes. Instead, Ozeki uses Ruth, the confused, biased character as the author of the footnotes. As it is not apparent in the first footnotes that it is the Ozeki as Ruth not Ozeki as author writing the footnotes, they complicate our idea of where Ozeki ends and Ruth begins.

Other authors have employed the character as footnote author in different ways. Junot Díaz, an author famous for not producing translations, uses his footnotes both for narrative effect and to give the history of Trujillo, a cruel dictator of the Dominican Republic. In all these cases, the footnotes serve *both* the traditional task of explanation as well as character development. The footnotes foster both narrative and cultural navigation. As Sean O’Brian notes, the history of the Dominican Republic takes place in footnotes, because the character supposedly writing the narrative chose the footnote format.<sup>120</sup> There are thirty-three footnotes

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<sup>117</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 422.

<sup>118</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, Kindle Location 6397.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 6418.

<sup>120</sup> Sean P. O’Brian, “Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization, and *The Brief*

in the *Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*. O'Brian suggests that “Yunior thinks readers need to know the history to understand the story, or that they should, in a more general sense, know more about Dominican history than they do.”<sup>121</sup> Another way of looking at this is that the relegation of the history to the footnotes establishes that a history that is very important to Yunior is almost invisible to the majority of English-language readers. And this might be why some of the notes are written in what O'Brian calls a “challenging tone.”<sup>122</sup> There are many pop cultural references but few of these are explained or footnoted. Indeed for Díaz, “otakuness”<sup>123</sup> doesn’t warrant a footnote. Either Yunior/Díaz expects the reader to understand the reference or he sees no need to explain it. Meanwhile, Ozeki devotes two separate footnotes to the word. The first provides a simple explanation “otaku (お宅)— obsessive fan or fanatic, a computer geek, a nerd.”<sup>124</sup> And the second complicates the word: “Also a formal way of saying ‘you,’ means ‘house,’ and with the honorific... Makes sense that the stereotype of the modern otaku is a shut-in, an obsessed loner and social isolate who rarely leaves his house.”<sup>125</sup>

While both Díaz and Ozeki use footnotes in a manner that is somewhat metafictional and which navigates different cultural and linguistic criss-crossing, it should be noted that they do so to very different ends. Ruth’s footnotes do not have the challenging tone of Yunior’s. If anything their tone is puzzled. Yunior is commenting on a narrative supposedly composed by himself, whereas Ruth is commenting on Nao’s. Rather than someone explaining to the ignorant, Ruth’s footnotes present a character attempting to make a connection. It is important to note that for Yunior Japan represents a third culture; it is not the Dominican Republic from which his family has come and nor is it the America in which he lives. He is telling the story of his friend

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<sup>121</sup> *Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 45, no. 1 (2012): 84.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*, (New York: Riverhead Books), 21.

<sup>124</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 422.

<sup>125</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, Kindle Location 6409.

Oscar (also with family from the Dominican Republic) who has chosen this otakuness as an escape from the two environments he is in. For Nao, the otakus are part of her everyday environment. They are part of a culture that she has not chosen. Both Ruth and Nao are of Japanese descent. Nao has two Japanese parents but grew up mostly in California before moving back to Tokyo. Ruth is mixed race. By making these footnotes, Ruth is marking the attempts at connection she is making to Nao. Over the course of the novel, Ruth studies Japanese history and improves her language skills in order to better understand Nao. At times she struggles or fails to find a reference. For Ruth, Japanese culture is simultaneously something she has chosen to investigate and part of her inheritance. If in Díaz's work, otakuness is a distancing of Oscar from the reader who is not sufficiently otaku to understand, then in Ozeki the word becomes symbolic of an attempt to bridge a linguistic and cultural gap, modeled for the reader by the character Ruth.

What Diaz's and Ozeki's characters have in common is that they cannot be otakus in the literal sense of someone shut in their home. None of them are able to be fully at home. All of them have crossed national and linguistic boundaries. And this makes the differences between using the word to present connection and isolation particularly striking.

### **Reader and Writer**

Ruth is both a reader and a writer. It is her reading of Nao's text that frames the real-world reader's understanding of the diary. The traditional I-novel only focused on the writer and perhaps the process of writing. But readers were largely abstract. By making the role of reader as important as the role of writer, Ozeki encourages the implied reader of the novel to consider their own role. In "Robert Coover, Metafiction, and Freedom," Margaret Heckard writes that

metafiction encourages the reader to “stand back and view himself.”<sup>126</sup> *A Tale for the Time Being* repeatedly draws attention to the process of reading and questioning the nature of readership. The words “reader” or “reading” appear in some form sixty-two times in the course of the novel. In Nao’s very first section she speculates as to the nature of the reader: “I wonder about you. Who are you and what are you doing?”<sup>127</sup> Ozeki then lists nine different possible activities and locations for the reader. The reader becomes aware of their own physical presence. Ozeki is quite literally encouraging the reader to stand back and view him or herself. The locations chosen are sufficiently mundane that there is a reasonable chance that some readers will find their own situation explicitly mentioned. While “having your toenails buffed in Abu Dhabi” is quite specific, “Do you have a cat and is she sitting on your lap” or “Is your girlfriend cooking you a yummy dinner?” are generic enough that they are likely to apply more widely.<sup>128</sup> Even those who do not find themselves on the list have been encouraged to look. This is Heckard’s self-viewing in action. Ozeki is also reminding the reader that, as Waugh argues, “Fiction is...always incomplete, always to be completed by the reader.”<sup>129</sup>

Ruth and Oliver have an argument about who is the true reader of the text. Ruth feels the text is directed to her specifically, but Oliver disagrees. “I’ve listened to you read the diary, so I think I qualify as part of you by now. And besides, “you” can be either singular or plural, so how do you know she wasn’t referring to both of us from the beginning?”<sup>130</sup> This passage is all the more charged because Ozeki’s partner Oliver was thanked for his “collaboration” in the acknowledgements.<sup>131</sup> A collaborator is a co-creator. It is reasonable to guess that real-world Oliver read some or several drafts of the book. So character Oliver is a possible implied reader

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<sup>126</sup> Margaret Heckard, “Robert Coover, Metafiction, and Freedom,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 22, no. 2 (1976): 211.

<sup>127</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 3.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>129</sup> Waugh, *The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, 105.

<sup>130</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 344.

<sup>131</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, Kindle Location 6393.

of Nao's diary and real-world Oliver is an intended reader of *A Tale for the Time Being*. This encourages the real reader of *A Tale for the Time Being* to notice their own role as implied reader.

This reader-writer relationship bears a faint resemblance to Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, in which Kinbote's long footnotes comment on Shade's poem. When interviewed, Ozeki admitted to Nabokov as an influence.<sup>132</sup> Like Nabokov, she has written a novel where one character comments on another. Nabokov created *Pale Fire* from two narratives, the poetry of John Francis Shade and the deranged annotations of Charles Kinbote, his neighbor. Ostensibly Kinbote has no narrative of his own, but as the book progresses his relationship to Shade is illuminated. Via the footnotes Kinbote narrates to us the past of his country, Zembla, while heavily implying that he is the escaped monarch of that land. Peggy Ward Corn describes the way a reader looks for connections to harmonise the two narratives' "combinational delight" and argues that it is the combination of the narratives that creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. "This enterprise, finding the patterns that unify the parts, is both the subject matter of *Pale Fire* and the experience of linking up its parts as we read."<sup>133</sup> This is equally true of Ozeki; the plot and the power of the novel comes from the combinational delight of the two very different novels.

However, Ruth's footnotes and commentary have a different character from the commentary in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote's commentary conflicts with Shade's poem, positing its own alternate narrative. Shade is telling the story of his daughter's death while Kinbote is imposing the story of a fallen Zembla upon the poem. For example, when Shade writes "We have been married forty years," Kinbote's commentary is that:

John Shade and Sybil Swallow (see note to line 247) were married in 1919, exactly three decades before King Charles wed Disa, Duchess

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<sup>132</sup> Ozeki, "Ozeki Interview" Appendix, ii.

<sup>133</sup> Peggy Ward Corn, "'Combinational Delight': The Uses of the Story within a Story in 'Pale Fire,'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* (1987): 87.

of Payn. Since the very beginning of his reign (1936-1958) representatives of the nation, salmon fishermen, non-union glaziers, military groups, worried relatives, and especially the Bishop of Yeslove, a sanguineous and saintly old man, had been doing their utmost to persuade him to give up his copious but sterile pleasures and take a wife.<sup>134</sup>

The contrast between the commentary creates both humor and drama. As the book goes on the rift between Kinbote's commentary and Shade's poetry seems only to grow.

In *A Tale for the Time Being* the work of the footnotes is not to split the two narratives but to bring them together. Ruth is constantly explicating Nao. The first six footnotes are just translations required for a non-Japanese reader to understand Japanese text. Where a period of history is mentioned, it reflects the accepted understanding of that period in history, for example “Taishō era, 1912–1926, named for the Taishō emperor, also called Taishō Democracy; a short-lived period of social and political liberalization, which ended with the right-wing military takeover that led to World War II.”<sup>135</sup> This contrasts with the Zemblan narrative, which is not only fictional but which the reader quickly comes to believe is being described by an unreliable and possibly delusional narrator.<sup>136</sup> Even when Ruth fails to understand Nao, we are given a sense of her striving to do so. For example, Ruth “searched Google for these names but found nothing.” So she goes further and tries to guess the kanji, but is in the end forced to give up. Ruth’s humble attempts at detection are vastly different from Kinbote’s narrative flights.

The relationship between the dual protagonists is so different in part because they choose to model the diasporic selves very differently. In Nabokov, we are presented with an

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<sup>134</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 173.

<sup>135</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, Kindle Location 6400.

<sup>136</sup> In *Stalking Nabokov* Brian Boyd, the author of four books on Nabokov’s work, writes “*Pale Fire* has spawned notoriously divergent and irreconcilable interpretations” (p. 337). But the idea that Kinbote is delusional is a common one. And in almost all readings of the text, it seems that Kinbote is footnoting Shade’s text largely as an excuse to tell his own story as he sees it.

insider: Shade and an outsider: Kinbote. Adrian Wanner writes in “The Russian Immigrant Narrative as Metafiction,” that the experience of the Russian diaspora created a need for “a form of creative writing in which identity is actively constructed and performed.”<sup>137</sup> Wanner argues that a writer of the Russian diaspora is forced to enact and explain a sense of “Russianness” for those outside the Russian perspective and that “metafiction presents a particularly apt vehicle for this undertaking” because it draws attention to the constructed nature of the text.<sup>138</sup> In Nabokov this construction is especially apparent because of the conflicting nature of the narratives provided by Kinbote and Shade. Kinbote constructs himself as exotic outsider, but the medium he uses is a commentary on a highly American poem. For there to be foreigners there must be locals. In his essay “The Author as Reader as Nabokov: Text and Pretext in *Pale Fire*”, John Haegert argues against critics who see Kinbote’s commentary as an independent work of art: “Kinbote’s Zemblan narrative is first and foremost a critical commentary, that is, an exegetical work whose subsidiary status is defined and sustained by the prior existence of another work.”<sup>139</sup> Kinbote makes the same argument in reverse. Kinbote says that without his notes “Shade’s text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his... has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide.”<sup>140</sup> At first this statement seems ridiculous. Kinbote has ignored what is quite clearly the subject of the poem—the death of Shade’s daughter in favour of slapping on his own narrative about the deposed king of Zembla—a fictional kingdom that resembles a distorted Russia.<sup>141</sup> However, perhaps Kinbote is right. The text that has entranced critics and readers over the years is not Shade’s unadorned poem but

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<sup>137</sup> Adrian Wanner, “The Russian Immigrant Narrative as Metafiction,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 55, no. 1(2011): 59.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> John Haegert, “The Author as Reader as Nabokov: Text and Pretext in *Pale Fire*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26, no. 4 (1984): 413.

<sup>140</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 28–30.

<sup>141</sup> It is notable that in *Speak Memory* Nabokov notes that his Great-Grandfather led an expedition to the real geographical place Nova Zembla.

Nabokov's rendition of Kinbote's commentary on top of Shade's poem.

How is Ozeki constructing identity in her use of Nao and Ruth? The I-novel was in its 1920s form a way of working out how to present Japanese identity, in particular what it meant to be Japanese in the context of the arrival of European and American thought and sensibilities. Ozeki is not promoting a sense of performed Japaneseness as both Ruth and Nao are distanced in some way from that. Nao is an outcast in Japanese society, and Ruth is mixed race and living in Canada. Rather than a local and foreigner Ozeki presents characters negotiating hybrid identities, with one helping the other. While Kinbote comments on the work of the dead Shade, Ozeki's Nao and Ruth seem to exist simultaneously. And while the tension in *Pale Fire* comes in part from the tension between Kinbote's and Shade's opposing narratives, Ozeki models a double narration that is co-operative. Nao's diary begins to disappear—the pages appearing to be blank. Ruth "knew the pages had once been filled... The words had once been there, she was sure of it, and now they weren't."<sup>142</sup> Ruth as a reader must find a way to resurrect Nao's narrative. Ruth finds herself dreaming about Nao and Nao's life. In her dream, she meets Nao's father and persuades him not to kill himself. After this dream Ruth finds that the pages that were blank once again have diary entries in them. In another dream, Ruth finds a way to transport Nao's grandfather's diary. The actions Ruth takes in her dreams affect the course of Nao's life. This is despite the fact that Ruth's timeline is chronologically after Nao's. All of the events in Ruth's waking life take place after Japan's earthquake, whereas Nao's events take place beforehand.

"Fabulatory extravaganzas"<sup>143</sup> may show up in metafictional novels, but time/dream travel was not a feature of the I-novel of the 1920s. If the I-novel has its roots in an attempt to create a true or naturalist novel<sup>144</sup> then at first this might seem to exclude *A Tale for the Time Being* from the genre entirely. However, there are I-novels that describe seemingly fantastical events.

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<sup>142</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 42–343.

<sup>143</sup> Waugh, *The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, 9.

<sup>144</sup> See Chapter One.

For example, as mentioned in the first chapter, Folwer argues Fujieda Shizuo's *In Search of the Pure Land* is an I-novel, despite the narration continuing after the narrator's death due to the work's display of candor. Ozeki too is making a display of candor. In this case, it is a display of religious candor. Ozeki is a practicing Buddhist and she uses metafiction and the fantastical to illuminate her religious and philosophical views.

Metafiction is not the most obvious of religious forms. However Ozeki is not alone in using metafiction to describe belief. Scottish Catholic writer Muriel Spark's use of metafiction was both shaped by her belief and was a tool to describe that faith. Waugh writes of how metafiction became a way for Spark to model the role of God in the world. The all-knowing predestining author becomes a stand in for a higher authority. "We too, Spark implies, are created by a higher authority."<sup>145</sup> Waugh argues that Spark writes against a world that has forgotten God by "the stylized creation of fictional worlds where absolutely no one, and certainly not the reader, is allowed to"<sup>146</sup> forget God. In *Not to Disturb*, this being forbidden to forget is manifested both in her use of metafiction and the constant reminders of predestination. A pregnant woman intuits the unfolding of events. At one point some characters are described as having entered "the realm of predestination."<sup>147</sup> Just as Spark has already decided the fate of her characters, God has already decided the faith of the people on the earth.

Ozeki, like Spark, is using metafiction to elaborate on her faith. Both authors are writing from places of faith to an audience who may not share their beliefs. While in Spark's case her readers may have "forgotten God,"<sup>148</sup> in Ozeki's her primarily English-language audience could not be relied upon to have an understanding of Zen Buddhism, never mind subscribe to its belief system. While Spark stresses predestination, Ozeki uses metafiction to promote ideas of

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<sup>145</sup> Waugh, *The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, 114.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>147</sup> Muriel Spark, *Not to Disturb* (New York: New Directions, 1971), Kindle Locations 490–491.

<sup>148</sup> Waugh, *The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, 121.

interconnectedness and interdependence between different selves.

Ozeki's construction of self is one that not only allows for the interlinking of characters but actively requires it. Ozeki is a Zen Buddhist Priest. Her commitment to Buddhism occurred just before writing *A Tale for the Time Being*, during a time when she was undergoing intense personal confusion and pain. As she wrote in "Confessions of a Zen Novelist", "I'd been meditating in a halfhearted way since I was a teenager, but when my father died... I started sitting regularly, and then I met Norman Fischer and began practicing with his sanghas, attending longer retreats and sesshin."<sup>149</sup> She'd already written two novels but *A Tale for the Time Being* was the first novel she wrote after ordination. In "Confessions of a Zen Novelist" she described it as being "about a suicidal young girl, a 104-year-old Zen nun, and a novelist with writer's block. It's an I-novel, of course."<sup>150</sup> The very first person she thanks in her acknowledgements is her teacher Norman Fischer. This is a book that comes from a place of faith as thoroughly as Spark's work. But because the faith is different, so is the text. Spark could expect to be understood if not believed by her readers and thus her Christian God can hang over the text with the mere suggestion of predestination. But for Ozeki incorporating Buddhism in a book aimed at a primarily non-Buddhist audience requires the teaching of Buddhist ideas within the text.

Ozeki teaches Buddhist thinking to the implied reader by having her character Nao begin to learn about Buddhism from her nun grandmother, which in turn leads Ruth to learn more about Buddhism. This allows Ozeki to directly quote the Shōbgenzō by Buddhist master Dōgen: "In essence, everything in the entire universe is intimately linked with each other as moments in time, continuous and separate."<sup>151</sup> As she said in our interview, "In Buddhism there is no fixed self."<sup>152</sup> It is this conception of the self as both individual and linked to other selves that

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<sup>149</sup> Ruth Ozeki, "Confessions of a Zen Novelist," *Lion's Roar*, February 15, 2015.

<sup>150</sup> Ozeki, "Confessions of A Zen Novelist."

<sup>151</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 30.

<sup>152</sup> Ozeki, "Ozeki Interview", Appendix, xii.

determines how self is presented in *A Tale for the Time Being*. In Ozeki's words, "The book very much emerged out of the Buddhist practice that I was doing. This idea of what is a time being is at the heart of this question, of I-novel, too. Because I-novel is all about the self."<sup>153</sup> And so the self presented with great candor is a Buddhist self. It is a self which believes in the interconnectedness of all things. In Ozeki's understanding of the Buddhist self, all selves are linked. And thus she can even accommodate fabulism into this philosophy. Ruth is able to shape and change Nao's fate because they are, on an essential level, connected.

Once we understand that Ozeki's construction of the interlinked selves of Ruth and Nao finds its roots in Buddhist practice we see that there is nothing that could be more sincere or more of an attempt to depict reality and the self as she understands them. Thus her use of the I-novel is one that is just as sincere as any that came before it. The addition of metafiction and the fantastical do not work against this sincerity but with it.

The sincerely presented self in Ozeki's I-novel feels familiar to a reader of European and American texts. This is not coincidental. In his essay "Confronting the Modern", Andrew Hock Soon Ng points out that the I-novel coincides with the "discovery of interiority" in Japanese literature, in which the self or the exploration of it forms the central theme.<sup>154</sup> But "this notion of 'self'—autonomous and individual—is 'part and parcel of all other sorts of 'modern ideas being imported from Europe and America.'"<sup>155</sup> The I-novel was already hybrid. And Ozeki grows further hybridities on this root by employing metafiction and a hybrid Buddhism to present the reader with a vision of self that is rooted in Japanese, American, and European literature.

Nao and Ruth are presented as having detailed inner lives, which for at least the first two thirds of the book conform to a traditional realist mode. Equally they are similar to the

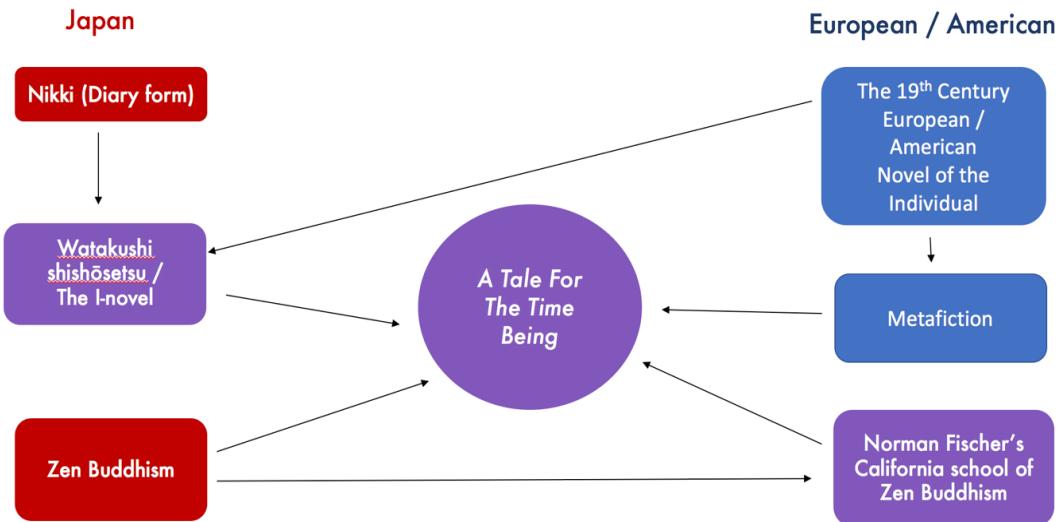
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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>154</sup> Andrew Ng, "Confronting the Modern: Kōbō Abe's 'The Box Man' and Yumiko Kurashiki's 'The Witch Mask,'" *Criticism* 51, no. 2 (2009): 311.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

protagonists of I-novels, both highly interior and, in their different ways, writers. But they are also Zen Buddhist selves. Given the complexity of the influences it is easier to depict it diagrammatically:



This diagram could be far more complex if one attempted to trace Chinese influences on Japanese literary forms or broke down the category of Euro-American into its constituent parts or traced the history of Buddhism through India. However, it shows how complex the sense of self is in *A Tale for the Time Being*. The I-novel may have been viewed by critics as the most Japanese of forms, but it was also the product of a violent confrontation of nations. Janet Walker, in her discussion of Japanese novels of the nineteenth century, described this as “a time when, through the dual forces of imperialism and colonialism, peoples of opposite sides of the globe came in contact with one another as never before.” It was this dramatic conflict that produced the I-novel and, for Walker, was when “the ‘epoch of world literature’ that Goethe, in January 1827, felt was ‘at hand’ actually came into being.”<sup>156</sup>

*A Tale for the Time Being* comes not just from the combining of two cultural traditions but

<sup>156</sup> Janet Walker, “The True History of the Nineteenth-Century Japanese Novel,” *Modern Philology* 106, no. 1 (2008): 141.

from a dense folding over and interleaving of cultures. For Ozeki to express the nature of an interlinked ocean and time-crossing self, she could not have employed only one form.

In Chapter Three we will see how this sense of hybridity is not only present in the framing of self-hood but in the structure of the book itself.

# Chapter Three Zen Buddhism and

## Hysterical Hybridity

The last chapter revealed that Ozeki used Zen Buddhism to bring together two seemingly disparate literary traditions to make her hybrid metafictional I-novel. This chapter will focus on how both Zen and notions of hybridity appear again and again in the book, and will identify how hybridity informs and shapes her Zen Buddhism. Her hybridity is Zen and her Zen is hybrid. To understand this fully, it is necessary to place Ozeki's Zen Buddhism within the history of Zen and its reception.

### Zen Buddhism

Many practitioners base their faith on meditation, otherwise known as zazen. Zen does not have key sutras and much of Zen philosophy is dependent on the analysis of the individual believer. As such it has undergone many historical variations. In the words of one Zen writer—D.T. Suzuki, catching “truth or reality or, shall I say, God,” using “concepts or intellection, is like trying to catch at catfish with a gourd.”<sup>157</sup> Rather than try to pin Zen down to a correct or authentic version, this paper will focus on the historical role it has played in Japan and the way in which Ozeki's hybrid practice is both an extension and a refutation of the beliefs of those before her.

### **Early History**

Buddhism, that is, the following of the teachings of the historical figure of Siddārtha Gautama,

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<sup>157</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki and Richard M. Jaffe, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 10.

began in India. It is widely believed to have arrived in China around the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, where a sect of Buddhism called Chan appeared. It is from this school that Zen is descended. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Zen schools came to prominence in Japan<sup>158</sup> where it was adopted by members of the elite samurai class. From this point of official acceptance, the history of Zen continues to be dynamic rather than static, its role in society changing and its beliefs shifting to fit the times.

### **Meiji Era (1868-1912)**

Although Zen is often believed to have had a strong influence on Japanese culture, it was and is not the only form of Buddhism present in Japan. For example, Shin (aka Pure Land Buddhism) has long been popular. There was also another major religion—Shintoism, a nature-based belief system. For a while, Buddhist ideology and Shinto ideology merged. However, in 1868 when Emperor Meiji came to power, he issued edicts separating the two—which banned among other things “the use of Buddhist names for Shinto deities” and Buddhist statues were no longer allowed in Shinto shrine compounds.<sup>159</sup> At this time, Buddhism was not seen as Japanese. It was a “foreign element” that “sullied” the Japanese nation.<sup>160</sup> In order to align themselves better with the nationalist government, many Buddhists, especially those of the Zen Rinzai sect, allied themselves with the government’s militaristic efforts.<sup>161</sup> Zen master Sōen was a Buddhist chaplain during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. He was no minor figure, having received a seal from his master to signify his “complete enlightenment.”<sup>162</sup> Leo Tolstoy wrote to Sōen hoping to enlist his help in the peace effort but received the reply, “As a means of bringing into

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<sup>158</sup> For a longer overview of Zen’s early history please see Sam van Schaik, *The Spirit of Zen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>159</sup> Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 5.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>161</sup> Priests of other sects, for example, Shin and Nichiren, also worked with the Meiji government, at varying levels of participation.

<sup>162</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, 29.

harmony those things which are incompatible, killing and war are necessary.”<sup>163</sup>

## World War II

As Japan became more heavily militarized in the run-up to WWII, Zen spokesmen proclaimed that Bushidō (the way of the warrior) was an essential component of Japaneseeness.<sup>164</sup> Zen scholars like Hayashiya and Shimakage argued for the possibility of a just Buddhist War calling it a war of “sublime compassion.”<sup>165</sup> They argued the war with China was part of an effort that would ‘transform the world into a pure Buddha land.’<sup>166</sup> During the war, Zen masters held meditation retreats for officers to prepare them for battle. And it was a Zen Buddhist text, *Great Duty* by Sugimoto Gorō, that was passed around to the young boys who would be drafted into the ranks of kamikaze pilots. This text made claims like “Warriors who sacrifice their lives for the emperor will not die...Truly, they should be called gods and Buddhas for whom there is no life.”<sup>167</sup> It instructed the reader to live in ‘pure loyalty’ to the Emperor.<sup>168</sup> In the words of Brian Daizen Victoria, whose extensive study *Zen At War* discusses this period in more detail: “The unity of Zen and the sword advocated by such Zen leaders...had come to this—drafting young boys into special attack units to become the infamous kamikaze.”<sup>169</sup> In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki imagines what the life of one such pilot, and her handling of this will be discussed later in the chapter.

Later commentators such as Christopher Ives argue that this enthusiasm for the military enterprise was in part accounted for by, “A traditional closeness to military leaders, indoctrination through the imperial education system, and by extension a good measure of

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 91–92.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 129.

patriotism as fully socialized Japanese citizens, Zen leaders jumped onto, and to some extent were pushed onto, a bandwagon that had been set in motion by other actors.”<sup>170</sup> The roots of Japanese imperialism are complex. What must be noted here is the way in which Zen beliefs were able to morph to the desires of believers in violent imperialism.

## Zen Boom

From the 1950’s to the 1970’s a phenomenon often termed the Zen Boom occurred in America and Europe. This religious sect once so associated with the war against America, became hugely popular in that very country. And it proved as able to shift towards the promotion of poetry or shampoo as it was imperialism.

In 1951, D.T. Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen* was reprinted and he went on a lecture tour in the United States. Gregory Levine, a historian of the Zen Boom, credits Suzuki’s book and tour with setting off the instigating spark. Suzuki’s ideas were taken up by American artists and writers, including the beat poets.<sup>171</sup>

In Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, a character describes a future in which “Zen lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads with no reason and also being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom.”<sup>172</sup> Zen was viewed as an anti-institutional anti-corporate force. Zen-trained British-American philosopher Alan Watt’s believed that Zen might offer “the reintegration of man and nature.”<sup>173</sup>

At the same time, Zen was being used in Japan and abroad for corporate purposes. In Japan, “employees were sent to monasteries and temples for short periods of meditation training

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<sup>170</sup> Christopher Ives, *Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen’s Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 127.

<sup>171</sup> Gregory P. A. Levine, *Long Strange Journey: On Modern Zen, Zen Art, and Other Predicaments* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2017), 104.

<sup>172</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin, 1971), 74.

<sup>173</sup> Levine, *Long Strange Journey*, 109.

to mold disciplined, obedient, and conforming workers.”<sup>174</sup> And in America, the word Zen was used to sell products, everything from perfume to Cassis liqueur.<sup>175</sup> Books, which stand somewhere on the line between works of art and commercial products, also took up the use of Zen. Perhaps the most famous today remains Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. It is a book about the writer’s own philosophical and emotional journey. Shoji Yamada in his work *Shots in The Dark, Japan Zen and the West*, writes of Pirsig, “there is no doubt that many people in the West felt a great spiritual connection” to the book but Yamada felt probably many Japanese would “have doubts about how real the Zen in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is.”<sup>176</sup> Yamada points out that this book lead to many spin-offs on its title, including *Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy*, *Zen and the Art of Changing Diapers*, *Zen and the Art of the SAT*, *Zen Art of Medical Image Registration*.<sup>177</sup> Yamada complains that “the majority of these books...do not say a single thing about Zen.”<sup>178</sup>

Some Zen writers at the time of the Zen Boom complained. Even D.T. Suzuki, so responsible for Zen’s popularity in America, thought that it had gone off the rails. And asked in 1958, “if he had met anyone in America who really understood Zen, Suzuki replied, ‘None.’”<sup>179</sup> He was skeptical of the Beat poets and did not view their work as true Zen. But was Suzuki’s Zen the true Zen? Suzuki was a layman whose whole career was based on explicating Buddhism. According to Yamada much of Suzuki’s writing and thoughts about Zen were “formed as a response to Western philosophy.”<sup>180</sup> Yet another instance of Zen being shaped to the needs of the time.

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<sup>174</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, 130.

<sup>175</sup> Levine discusses this commercial aspect of Zen extensively in *Long Strange Journey*.

<sup>176</sup> Shōji Yamada, *Shots in the Dark* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 14–16.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>179</sup> Levine, *Long Strange Journey*, 107.

<sup>180</sup> Yamada, *Shots in the Dark*, 223.

## Ruth Ozeki and Norman Fisher

So where in this lineage should we place Ozeki? She has written that “the very first memory I have, as a small human being, was of watching [my grandfather] sit zazen with my grandmother.”<sup>181</sup> Zazen is the name for meditation as practiced by Zen practitioners. This memory was from her Japanese grandparents’ visit. But though raised by them, Ozeki’s own mother had a loose relationship to the religion. Ozeki practiced meditation from her teenage life onwards, but as mentioned in the last chapter, has described this as “halfhearted.”<sup>182</sup> She began to study Zen more formally not in Japan, but in California, under the tutelage of Norman Fischer,

Fischer is an American Zen Buddhist poet who is also a member of the Jewish faith.<sup>183</sup> Unlike those who believed Zen Buddhism was essentially Japanese, Fischer sees Buddhism in America as being distilled rather than muddied. In an interview covering the meeting between post-structuralist poetry in America and Zen Buddhism Fischer said, “it gets stripped away from its superstitious basis and its authoritarian basis—from a lot of the problems in the Buddhism that we inherit.”<sup>184</sup> Taken out of context, this seems a bold and possibly even offensive statement, but when the Buddhist support of the war in the Pacific is taken into account, it is possible to see what he means. When interviewed about his Zen faith, he is colloquially American, “Oh, boy. Maybe the simplest and truest thing to say is that Zen doesn’t have a basic core concept. Zen is just appreciating being alive. There’s nothing to it beyond that.”<sup>185</sup> Despite the nothing beyond that, he is the author of nine books on Zen including: *Training in Compassion: Zen Teachings on the Practice of Lojong*; *World Could Be Otherwise: Imagination and*

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<sup>181</sup> Ruth Ozeki, “The Art of Losing,” [online] *Lion’s Roar*, <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-art-of-losing-2/>, [Accessed 7 Jun. 2019].

<sup>182</sup> Ozeki, “Confessions of a Zen Novelist”.

<sup>183</sup> Corey Fischer, “Our Grand Delusion,” *The Sun Magazine*, August 2018, <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/512/our-grand-delusion>.

<sup>184</sup> John Wright and Norman Fischer. “Language and Emptiness: An Interview with Norman Fischer,” *Chicago Review* 39, no. 3/4 (1993): 72.

<sup>185</sup> Fischer, “Our Grand Delusion”.

*the Bodhisattva Path; Taking Our Places: The Buddhist Path to Truly Growing Up.*

As an ordained Zen priest, he is no casual fad fanboy. And there is no doubt that he has spent many years devoted to his faith. But it is a very different faith than that outlined by Suzuki with his emphasis on Japaneseness and warrior culture. And it is Fischer who guided Ozeki on her journey to be a priest.

So then, Ozeki's Buddhism is an adopted American Buddhism alongside an inherited Japanese Buddhism. Her Buddhism is itself a hybrid. *A Tale for the Time Being* manifests this Zen Buddhism deeply informed by hybridity.

## Hysterical Hybridity

For Ozeki, hybridity is everywhere. It is evident in her vocabulary choices, her references, her epigraphs, her book trailer. The effect is to create a hybridity that is unrelenting, frenetic, hysterical even. In 2000, James Wood published an essay in the *New Republic* on what he termed “hysterical realism.”<sup>186</sup> He was writing of Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie, among others, and meant the term critically. “The different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels.”<sup>187</sup> This charge could be leveled at Ozeki and *A Tale for the Time Being*. As seen in the previous chapter, her very idea of self is one of intense inter-connection. But is hysterical such a bad thing to be?

The ancient Greek roots of the term hysteria imply a form of insanity: “ὑστερικός, belonging to the womb, suffering in the womb.”<sup>188</sup> This is because the “ancient Mediterranean world...believed that the bodily symptoms we now call hysterical were caused by

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<sup>186</sup> James Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman: On the formation of a new genre: hysterical realism,” *The New Republic*, July 24, 2000, <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman>.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Oxford English Dictionary “hysteric, adj. and n.”

a womb which wandered throughout the body.”<sup>189</sup> The Greeks had a very negative view of hysteria. But a wandering womb seems a fitting description of a hybrid novel. It implies both the travel and the power of creation that can come from those journeys. Ozeki’s novel does verge on the hysterical. Its hybridity multiplies with every chapter. Ozeki’s hybridity doubles back, even triples back on itself. This hysterical hybridity allows the writing to avoid suggesting an original or pure culture, while retaining the energy and dynamism of cultural connection.

Often hybrid writing is viewed as being the opposite of hysterical. Instead, it is categorised as subtle. Elleke Boehmer even posits that hybridity’s subtlety prevents it from being adequately bold. In “A Postcolonial Aesthetic,” Boehmer tries to identify what a postcolonial aesthetic might be, and in doing so notes that a hybrid aesthetic has dominated the conversation. Boehmer argues that there should be space for more kinds of postcolonial aesthetic: “One can doubtless make an equally convincing postcolonial case for writing that is openly combative rather than subtly hybrid.”<sup>190</sup> The argument that one aesthetic should not dominate the conversation is a good one. But the dichotomy between openly combative and subtly hybrid is false. Ozeki is bold. If not combative in the sense of aggressive, she is at least highly declarative. The presence of hybridity throughout the book is constant. She embraces hybridity at every level, from individual word choices, to literary references, to structure, to paratext. And so often this hybridity is framed by Ozeki’s Zen. If not quite proselytizing, she is at least very boldly promoting a version of Zen and a version of hybridity that together argue for a connected world. The rest of this chapter will cover the many ways that hybridity and Zen manifest within Ozeki’s work.

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<sup>189</sup> Mark J. Adair, “Plato’s View of the ‘Wandering Uterus’,” *The Classical Journal* 91, no. 2 (1995): 153.

<sup>190</sup> Elleke Boehmer, “A Postcolonial Aesthetic,” in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, eds. J. Wilson, C. Sandru, & S. Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 2010), 175.

## Epigraphs

Ozeki gives us an epigraph before each of the four sections of the novel parts. First Dōgen Zenji, then Proust, then Dōgen Zenji, then Proust. In his essay, “Introduction to Paratext”, Gérard Genette calls the items not included in the body of the novel paratexts. “One does not always know if one should consider that they belong to the text or not, but in any case they surround it and prolong it,’ and ‘assure its presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption.”<sup>191</sup> Genette describes these as “threshold” and “border” texts.<sup>192</sup> He locates the epigraph on the border between text and paratext. An epigraph is inseparable from the novel, and yet an epigraph is not in the author’s words and is set apart. It is a mode particularly suited to a book like Ozeki’s, which focuses so strongly on interconnectedness. In *Paratexts*, Genette suggests multiple purposes of the epigraph, three of which seem to apply. Each of the three also contributes to the novel’s hybridity.

Genette’s first reading of the epigraph is that it gives meaning to the book’s title. *A Tale for the Time Being*’s title appears in the first Dōgen Zenji epigraph. It consists of a nine-line quote; every single line begins with “*For the time being*. ”<sup>193</sup> The quote leads us to understand the double meaning of “time being”. “For the time being, the entire earth and the boundless sky’ comes to mean both that the sky and earth are only temporary and that they are in some way *for* humans—those creatures trapped in time.<sup>194</sup> And *A Tale for the Time Being* is a tale for us, but it is also a tale for a particular moment. Drawing on a translated source for the title hints at *A Tale for the Time Being*’s hybridity. This English language phrase borrowed from a translation of Japanese philosophy can only exist with the input of multiple cultures. It also serves to remind us that the entire book is named after a Zen text.

At the same time, we learn it will be a very particular kind of Zen text. The second to

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<sup>191</sup> Gérard Genette, “Introduction to Paratext,” *New Literary History* (1991): 261.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 2.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

last line is “For the time being, any Dick or Jane.”<sup>195</sup> But there is a footnote—"lit. third son of Zhang and fourth son of Li; an ordinary person."<sup>196</sup> Ozeki has replaced these with two ordinary English language names, but the note states that ‘it could just as well be “any Tom, Dick, or Harry.”’<sup>197</sup> It is arguable that Dick or Jane is a further step from the original, in which both of the ordinary people were men. It is also a less common phrase.<sup>198</sup> It is interesting to note also that Jane is the name of the protagonist in one of Ozeki’s previous books, *My Year of Meats*. So Ozeki begins her book not just with Zen Buddhism but with *her* Zen Buddhism.

This hybridity is reinforced by Genette’s second function—the epigraph as a comment on the text, “whose meaning it indirectly specifies or emphasizes.”<sup>199</sup> In other words, the epigraph tells us where to look. For example, the Proust epigraph: “In reality, every reader, while he is reading, is the reader of his own self.”<sup>200</sup> This speaks to the self-reflective elements of the book discussed in Chapter Two of this paper.

Genette argues that for many authors the most essential function of the epigraph is: “not what [the epigraph] says but who its author is.” Because this establishes the credentials of the author of the main text.<sup>201</sup> For Ozeki to have chosen one Japanese Buddhist and one French novelist is to have taken a stand on the novel’s and her own hybridity. She is mixed-race, a priest and a novelist. Her novel reflects these selves. Genette traced the route of epigraphs to the habit of including an author’s coat of arms.<sup>202</sup> We can see Ozeki’s text armed with Proust and Dōgen, presenting her lineage just as a coat of arms might once have done.

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>198</sup> As of writing this a google search returns 140,000 results for ‘Tom Dick, or Harry’ and only 27,000 for ‘Dick or Jane.’

<sup>199</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 159.

<sup>200</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 110.

<sup>201</sup> Genette, *Paratexts*, 159.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 144.

## Epitext—book trailer

Genette draws a distinction between two types of paratext—peritext, text attached to the main text, and epitext, freely circulating text. In epitext he includes interviews and statements made to the press. Indeed, according to Genette, “everything a writer says or writes about his life, about the world around him, about the works of others, may have paratextual relevance.”<sup>203</sup> Genette’s *Partexts* does not mention book trailers, which existed at the time of the book’s publication, but which were not widespread. Other writers have however made the connection. Rosa Taberno Sala writes that, “Book-trailers would be part of the epertextual background of books, as defined by Genette... in such a way that they correspond to the virtual translation of epitexts, like back cover texts.”<sup>204</sup> Rasmus Grøn, who describes the book trailer as a pretext, also considers it to be a hybrid genre—part literary, part promotional and certainly cross genre.<sup>205</sup> The juncture between literary and commercial takes place because the book trailer’s promotional value “primarily depends on its framing of the reading experience by communicating specific indications of the character of the text.”<sup>206</sup> What were Ozeki’s American publishers, Viking Books, trying to indicate when they released the trailer for *A Tale for the Time Being*? The trailer intercut new footage filmed to recreate the content of the novel with footage from both the 2011 Tsunami and World War II. A second hybridity occurs as Ozeki plays Ruth, creating a further merging of author and character. In the trailer, she walks along the shore and discovers a book with the round purple handwriting described in the novel. When asked if she felt she was being herself in the trailer or if she was acting a character, Ozeki said:

Ruth the character is a version of me. She’s me. Why not?... The way I

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>204</sup> Rosa Tabernero Sala and Virginia Calvo Valios, “Book-Trailers as Tools to Promote Reading in the Framework of the Web 2.0,” *New Review of Children’s Literature and Librarianship* 22, no. 1(2016): 57.

<sup>205</sup> Rasmus Grøn, “Literary experience and the book trailer as intermedial paratext,” *SoundEffects - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 4, no. 1(2014): 92.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 91.

felt about that character was that, even though I didn't actually find a diary washed up on the beach in a Hello Kitty lunchbox, the idea of a diary washed up on a beach in a Hello Kitty lunchbox did, in fact, wash up on the shores of my imagination. So, metaphorically speaking, Ruth, fictional Ruth's experience, is very much like author Ruth's experience.<sup>207</sup>

Her trailer is a performance, but becomes the performance of the truth. "It's like a mirror relationship, a distorted mirror, but they mirror each other."<sup>208</sup> The hybrid self that is performed in the pages of the novel here crosses into the hybrid form of the book trailer. Hybridity upon hybridity. Part of why Ozeki is so comfortable with the wobbly line between fiction and non-fiction is her idea of the Zen Buddhist self. She explained, "In Buddhism there is no fixed self...so, the idea of what's fictional, and, what's nonfictional, it dissolves."<sup>209</sup>

Ozeki has worked in film as well as being a novelist. While she may have had autobiographical interpretations thrust upon her novels, as a filmmaker she had been playing with the idea of autobiography for some time. Much of Ozeki's film work is semi-autobiographical and plays with ideas about what might or might not be true. Her documentary, *Halving the Bones*, is semi-autobiographical. It presents a straight family-history documentary, before revealing that not all of the stories she tells are true. Rather, they are stories that she believed about her family, owing to "cultural confusion."<sup>210</sup> Because of the perilous nature of many immigrants' lives, her own family history was obscured, and the documentary is in part an act of discovery and in another part an act of invention.

The book trailer, then, as a hybrid form born of the film trailer and the novel, is

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<sup>207</sup> Ozeki, "Ozeki Interview," Appendix, x.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>210</sup> "Halving The Bones." *Ozekiland*. Accessed July 4, 2017. <http://www.ruthozeki.com/writing-film/halving-the-bones/>.

particularly suited to her semi-autobiographical novel, when depicting her semi-autobiographical self. Although many readers may never see the book trailer, it is a demonstration of what is meant by hysterical hybridity. It is hybridity that multiplies. Each hybrid concept has the potential to be mixed with another and another, so that the work becomes only more hybrid. And her belief in the Buddhist self allows her to comfortably straddle those lines.

### **Haruki—Ghosts, Literal and Literary**

While Ruth is the mixed race author stand in and Nao is the language playing teenager, Haruki represents the past, both through the relationship she gives him to Japan's history and the way in which he models literary hybridity.

Ruth and Nao's narratives take up the majority of the text. Central to the story, however, is the double image of the two men called Haruki. Nao's father Haruki has been named after her Great Uncle. There are two sections in the voice of Nao's Great Uncle, first through his diary and then his letters. This original Haruki is a kamikaze pilot in World War II. He is first introduced by Nao as such: "Haruki #1 was a kamikaze pilot... before he became a suicide bomber he was a student of philosophy at Tokyo University."<sup>211</sup>

Haruki speaks two times in the novel, first through his letters, which on the surface present a highly patriotic young man ready to die for his country. This fits with much of the prevailing narrative about kamikaze pilots. His statements are on the surface pro-war and pro-Japanese nationalism: "As I have not much time left in life, I am determined not to be a coward."<sup>212</sup> The idea of national purity was powerful in Japan at that time.<sup>213</sup>

He is seemingly totally in step with the dominant ethos. Nothing in his letters contradicts

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<sup>211</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 68.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>213</sup> This had developed in response to Japan's weak position internationally. Admiral Perry had forced Japan to open ports. Both American and European powers forced Japan into unequal treaties.

declarations such as that of ex Zen practitioner and army major Ōkubo Kōichi to the effect that the soldier “must become the order he receives. That is to say, his self must disappear.”<sup>214</sup> This was the era in which such statements were common. Seki Seisetsu, a Zen master, wrote that “Zen and the sword become completely one...united in this way, they become the sublime leading spirit of society,”<sup>215</sup> the implication for the common soldier being: “All of you should obey imperial mandates, being loyal, brave, faithful, frugal and virile.”<sup>216</sup> As the war reached its final stages, there was a literary effort to celebrate the kamikaze cause as worthwhile. Keene writes that “The last months of the war produced many panegyrics of the kamikaze aviators, violent denunciations of pessimism.”<sup>217</sup> While McKay tells that in the Anglophone world, Japanese soldiers were either shown as “sword-swinging automata” or dying by “a suicide that is seen as inherent to character type, not state indoctrination or coercion.”<sup>218</sup> Neither propagandist view left much room for them to have full or philosophical interior lives.

But Haruki’s secret French diary reveals his true misgivings about both the way the pilots were treated and about the mission itself. He has been pro-war in his letters only because he knew they would be censored. Daniel McKay argues that Ozeki “successfully humanizes the kamikaze pilot through a prism of intergenerational family relations.”<sup>219</sup> Part of the humanisation is breaking out of the mode of imagining the kamikaze pilot as simply an avatar of a Japanese spirit. It is in French, not his native language, that he is able to show his more sincere self. He writes of his desire not to kill and describes the true brutality of the bullying K received. He quotes “Montaigne, paraphrasing Cicero.”<sup>220</sup> But he also goes back again and again

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<sup>214</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, 103.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Donald Keene, “Japanese Writers and the Greater East Asia War,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23, no. 2 (1964): 223.

<sup>218</sup> Daniel McKay, “The Right Stuff: The Kamikaze Pilot in Kerri Sakamoto’s One Hundred Million Hearts and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*,” *MELUS* 41, no. 1 (2016): 9.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>220</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 323.

to the Zen master Dōgen. Writing in French is not a refutation of all Japanese philosophy, but instead becomes a means for Haruki to discover his own truth.

Haruki's fascination with international literature manifests in the appellation he chooses to give his friend: "The one I truly feel sorry for is K, who was senior to me in the Department of Philosophy."<sup>221</sup> K will go on to be bullied and eventually to die for his pacifism. That he is called K is a ruse on Haruki's part to hide K's identity. But why that particular letter?

A reader familiar with the European canon will immediately think of Kafka's Joseph K. (Ruth finds some copies of Kafka in a junk shop which reinforces this connection.)<sup>222</sup> In *The Trial*, Kafka's K is trapped in a series of cases enacted upon him by a higher authority to whom he has no access. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki's K is horrendously bullied by their superior, until he commits suicide. As Haruki puts it in his letter, the officer in charge's training methods "are akin to those of the brilliant<sup>223</sup> French soldier the Marquis de Sade."<sup>224</sup>

But there is a second reference that Haruki is making by using the letter K instead of his friend's name. Haruki writes that he has been reading Sōseki. "You will be happy to know that as I wait to die, I have been reading poetry and novels again. Old favorites by Soseki..."<sup>225</sup> <sup>226</sup> *Kokoro* is possibly the most famous of Sōseki's novels and features a character known as K. *Kokoro* is the story of two friendships. K is a young man who, like Ozeki's K, commits suicide. K in the Japanese text is referred to by the roman alphabet's capital letter. The possible reasons for this are multiple. Sōseki studied European texts and would likely have encountered the eighteenth-century habit of using initials to stand in for people and places, as in Samuel

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>223</sup> He uses the word brilliant as it is a censored letter. But the use of the European literary reference unlikely to be understood by a superior officer allows Haruki to imply his true feelings.

<sup>224</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 253.

<sup>225</sup> Romanisation of Japanese names and words sometimes differs. In my own text ソー is rendered Sō but Ozeki renders it So and others have been known to use Sô. When quoting I have left the writers' choice untouched.

<sup>226</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 257.

Richardson's Mr. B in *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* and Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*, where place names are referred to as "the borough of X——" <sup>227</sup> and "the town of X——." <sup>228</sup> As to why K, there are several possibilities. Sōseki is a pen name, and his non-writing name Kinnosuke. K, like Sōseki and the protagonist of his I-novel *Grass On the Wayside*, was adopted. It may be K for the title. *Kokoro* means heart (emotional rather than spiritual) and K's death is the feeling heart of the book. Another possible reading is that 刑 or punishment in Japanese is pronounced Kei, the same way that a capital K is pronounced.<sup>229</sup> Sensei's tale in *Kokoro* is in so many ways one of self-punishment. Sensei betrayed K by proposing to the woman K loved. K then committed suicide. Sensei is plagued by guilt and many years later will commit suicide himself. Ozeki's K also commits suicide, as will Haruki. *The Trial* was published in 1925, and *Kokoro* in 1914. *Kokoro*'s most well-known translation was not published until 1957.<sup>230</sup> Simply—the two Ks were birthed independently of one another, and yet in Haruki's narration we find a hybrid K who is a little part of each. In all three books, K is a somewhat tragic character. And by giving him this name, Haruki (and Ozeki) makes an anti-nationalist argument that no one nation has a monopoly on tragedy.

It is finally Zen that allows Haruki to decide how to handle his conflicting loyalties to his loved ones, to his country, with his pacifist feelings. Reading Dōgen's line, "To study the Way is to study the self" that causes Haruki "to sit zazen and to study [his] thoughts and feelings."<sup>231</sup> And in turn it is this sitting that allows him to come to terms with the fact that his beliefs mean that he does not want to kill men who he has "never met" and "cannot hate."<sup>232</sup> When considering the moment in which he will die, having chosen not to kill, Haruki quotes Dōgen's

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<sup>227</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 8.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>229</sup> It should be noted that Japanese is a homophone-rich language and this is only one of many kanji that could correspond to kei. For example, 兄 or brother, which would neatly capture the closeness of the two young men.

<sup>230</sup> McClellan's translation has long been treated as the definitive translation.

<sup>231</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 323.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 223.

writing that “a single moment is all we need to establish our human will and attain truth.”<sup>233</sup>

This is a very different understanding of Dōgen than was being modelled by the authorities during his lifetime.

Haruki’s personal exploration of Zen ends up placing him squarely in opposition to the officially accepted version of Zen doctrine. This interpretation was exemplified in the contemporaneous world outside of Ozeki’s novel, by Zen believer and Lieutenant Colonel Sugimoto Gorō. Sugimoto too was a reader of the Dōgen. Urging loyalty to the Emperor, Sugimoto quotes Dōgen’s phrase “to study the self is to forget the self.”<sup>234</sup> Sugimoto took those words to signify that “To forget the self means to discard both body and mind” and that this discarding of the self would lead to “the unity of the sovereign and his subjects, the origin of faith in the emperor.”<sup>235</sup>

For Haruki, hybridity is performed in the way he uses multiple sources of knowledge and philosophy. His literary knowledge allows him to come to his own conclusions about the international war in which he is taking part. The use of literature to produce hybrid philosophy strongly suggests how Ozeki intends the hybrid literatures of the novel to be understood. Throughout *A Tale for the Time Being*, hybridity is presented as a form of strength, whether that is Nao’s supapawa or Ozeki taking control of the autobiographical narrative that had previously been imposed upon her.

Nao meets Haruki’s ghost on Obon, the Japanese day of the dead. This sets off her obsession with him. In *Cultural Haunting*, Kathleen Brogan asserts, “Ghosts in contemporary American ethnic literature... re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and... press this new version of the past into the service of the present.”<sup>236</sup> For Nao,

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>234</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, 120.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 4.

Haruki becomes a way of understanding her own family's past and of coming to terms with her father. The hybrid narrative presented by her Grand Uncle's letters and diaries becomes Haruki's way of writing against the dominant Japanese culture. They also become Ozeki's method of contesting the idea of kamikaze pilots as a homogenous group. This allows the reader to re-understand the historical period and challenges the dominant narrative in Anglophone literature that depicts the Japanese pilots as mindless.

Brogan writes that "In contemporary haunted literature, ghost stories are offered as alternative—or challenge—to 'official,' dominant history."<sup>237</sup> There are few records of any Zen dissidence or rebellion. And those that were recorded seem minor. For example there is a record of a Zen priest who refused to participate in an execution of blindfolded Chinese prisoners. But there is no detailed record of how that interacted with his Zen beliefs, only that he could not "bear" to do it.<sup>238</sup> This may in large part be down to censorship and the many pressures on all Japanese soldiers, Zen and non-Zen. As Christopher Ives writes "many of the Japanese soldiers had been conscripted, abused by their own officers...and feared shaming their families back home."<sup>239</sup> It is doubtful that all Zen practitioners mindlessly supported the official line. Haruki with his hybrid reading and Zen pacifism challenges the available narratives about Zen and kamikaze pilots. The challenge is presented both by his thoughtful pacifism and by the hybrid nature of Haruki's interests and writings. Ozeki here is challenging both the American dominant history and the dominant narrative in Japan at the time. Ozeki has created a character in Haruki who, rather than embracing nationalism, is interested in literary traditions that crossed nations. When he appears as a ghost in the novel, Ozeki is able to create a new history.

## Hybrid Language

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>238</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, 76.

<sup>239</sup> Christopher Ives, *Imperial Way Zen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 21.

Throughout *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki employs linguistic play that invokes hybridity. This comes from translation, the insertion of Japanese words into English text, the invention of hybrid words, and from cross-cultural reading. While Chapter Two of this essay focused on the representation of the character Ruth, hybridity does not solely reside in this character. The book's structure contains three distinct character points of view: Ruth's hybrid I-novel/metafictional self; Nao's teenage diary; and Haruki's letters and diaries. Each of these characters presents a somewhat hybrid view point: Ruth's hybridity comes from her mixed race heritage, Nao's hybridity comes from living in both America and Japan, and Haruki's hybridity derives from an education that allows him to draw on both European and Japanese philosophy. In each case, this hybridity is manifested in the language the character employs. When, as mentioned earlier, Ozeki described *A Tale for the Time Being* as an I-novel but not a *watakushi shōsetsu*, she was enacting a form of hybrid language.<sup>240</sup> I-novel is a translation of *watakushi shōsetsu*, so her distinction is significant. Original and translation are normally understood to refer to the same books. Ozeki, by describing her work as an I-novel but *not* a *watakushi shōsetsu* makes the process of translation part of the meaning of the word I-novel and implies that the process of translation can result in a third, different thing. This too is a way of making language hybrid.

We can use Evelyn Ch'ien's book *Weird English* to understand how the language play Ozeki grants each character builds the characters' and the novel's hybridity. Ch'ien examines writers who incorporate dialects, multiple languages, and self-created words into their work. She argues that by creating weird English, "artistic redemption through the invention of language"<sup>241</sup> is possible. "The use of weird English is a calculated effort. For polycultural writers, weird English is not simply the temporary adoption of a spelling disorder, but a conscious appropriation of hybridity."<sup>242</sup> By confronting a reader with unfamiliar language, Ozeki makes

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<sup>240</sup> Ozeki, "Ozeki Interview" Appendix, i.

<sup>241</sup> Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien, *Weird English* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), Kindle Location 579.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 53.

hybridity part of the construction of the text itself. The invention of language becomes an expression of hybridity in *A Tale for the Time Being*.

For example, Ch'ien gives particular attention to the power of a name: "The etymology of a name can evoke imagined communities, training the products of diasporas to live in the imagination. Our histories and their symbolic bundles, our names, can connect us to more than one nation."<sup>243</sup> Early in the book, Ozeki describes Ruth's relationship to her name. In the last chapter, we focused on how, by examining Ruth's name, Ozeki draws attention to Ruth as a semi-authorial protagonist. In doing so, Ozeki locates Ruth's name in multiple cultures. She begins with its Anglo-Saxon history, pointing out that Ruth "is derived from the Middle English *rue*, meaning remorse or regret."<sup>244</sup> She goes on to reinterpret it through its Japanese pronunciation: "Ruth is either pronounced *rutsu*, meaning 'roots,' or *rusu*, meaning 'not at home' or 'absent.'"<sup>245</sup> This single name demonstrates the tension of interpretation, of cultures meeting, and of hybridity. Ruth is not an obviously hybrid name, but Ozeki's reading makes it part of hybrid language. This so infuses the character's sense of identity that, over three hundred pages later, she is still worrying that she is "as absent as her name indicated, a homeless and ghostly composite of words."<sup>246</sup> In both languages, Ruth feels uncomfortable and displaced. Yet at this moment towards the end of the book, when she is uncertain about everything, herself, what the nature of truth is, she remembers Dōgen, whom she has learned about in her time interacting with Nao and Haruki. Ruth quotes, "To study the self is to forget the self."<sup>247</sup> And this leads her to think that, "Maybe if you sat enough zazen, your sense of being a solid singular self would dissolve and you could forget about it. What a relief."<sup>248</sup> Zen makes a lack of self a good thing. So, the seeming-problem caused by negotiating a hybrid self is resolved by Zen.

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 33–35.

<sup>244</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 59.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

Despite the omnipresence of hybrid language in the book, it is Nao whose sections most thoroughly deploy it to reflect her personal narrative themes. Nao is a Japanese girl, who once lived in America, writing in English while in Tokyo. It makes sense that her language would be hybrid.

There are two particularly prominent types of hybrid language: the first is the placement of Japanese words within English sentences, and the second is the invention of new words. Nao performs both. Ch'ien writes of how Junot Díaz includes both Spanish and Dominican-Spanish in his largely English language novel (the English of which also comprises a mix of registers.) She argues that “His internal hybridism materializes as this space of heterogeneous unintelligibility.”<sup>249</sup> In other words, Díaz’s feeling of being torn between Dominican and Anglo-American culture is manifested by a blending of languages, not all of which may be understood by the reader. By doing this, Ch'ien explains that Díaz “implicitly argues for the coexistence of cultures. The representation of another culture in another language should be hybrid, so as to avoid assimilation or erasure.”<sup>250</sup> Díaz places himself and this narrative within the Dominican diaspora that he feels is threatened by both assimilation and erasure. Ozeki is a half-Caucasian-American, half-Japanese person who splits her time between Canada and the US. She lacks the same sort of community that Díaz describes. Ozeki does not locate herself within a particular diasporic community. Nao, the character as writer, is a Japanese girl who spent her formative years in the United States, has moved back to Japan and will end up in Canada by the end of the book. That these women are isolated in their identities rather than being part of a larger cultural unit such as New Jersey’s Dominican-American community does not make Ozeki’s use of hybrid language any less powerful. The fact that Nao, a teenager girl, is able to find her own language to represent her own singular existence is a demonstration of the importance and role of hybrid language.

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<sup>249</sup> Ch'ien, *Weird English*, Kindle Location 1969.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 2021–2022.

Nao writes, “As for me, right now I am sitting in a French maid café in Akiba Electricity Town.”<sup>251</sup> Akiba is the Japanese colloquial shortening of Akihabara or 秋葉原—a literal translation of which would be autumn leaf field. Akihabara Denki Gai ( 秋葉原電氣街, or Akihabara Electric Town) was a nickname the area acquired after World War II, when it became the go-to place for electrical goods. In three words, Nao switches from Japanese slang to English translation. She places herself in a hybrid borderland. She is feeling creeped out by an “Otaku salaryman.”<sup>252</sup> Again, we have the Japanese words abutting against Anglicization. Salaryman is given no footnote, and the reader is left to parse it. The meaning seems clear—a man who works for a salary. But the history is complex. In Japanese, the word is rendered—**サラリーマン**. If written out in Roman characters it would be sararīi-man. The Japanese took the word for salary and the word for man in order to describe both a position and a psychological outlook. “The salaryman usually refers to university-educated white-collar male employees who work full-time in large private-sector companies and institutions. Within work they are expected to be loyal to their employers, diligent, dedicated, and self-sacrificing.”<sup>253</sup> At first, this was considered a valuable and meaningful role. “Linked to rapid expansion, the rebuilding of the nation, and a growing economy, salarymen were said to embody ‘the samurai spirit.’”<sup>254</sup> However, as Emma Cooke notes in *Super Girls, Gangstas, Freeters, and Xenomaniacs: Gender and Modernity in Global Youth Culture*, this ideal has come into question, with many young men and women associating the role with mindless drudgery. Salaryman, made of two English words but used in Japan, has become freighted with meaning and history, and this is what Nao feeds back to her reader.

Unlike salaryman, we are given an explanation of Otaku, but not by Nao. The footnote

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<sup>251</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 3.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>253</sup> Emma Cook, “Still a Child?: Liminality and the Construction of Youthful Masculinities in Japan,” in *Gangstas, Freeters, and Xenomaniacs: Gender and Modernity in Global Youth Culture*, eds. Susan Dewey and Karen J. Brison (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 71.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 69.

translates otaku as “obsessive fan or fanatic, a computer geek, a nerd.”<sup>255</sup> Throughout Nao’s text the character Ruth adds footnotes and explanations. Chapter Two outlined some of the possible metafictional implications of this move, but there is a second possible reading. Ruth the character, is represented as an adult writer some way into her career. Nao is a teenage girl with much of her future ahead of her. So perhaps we can see Nao as representing a new future, in which hybridity does not have to explain itself. But as powerful as this hybridity is, it is not exactly comfortable. Nao is also lost, alone, bullied, and struggling to cope with her father’s depression. The reason she is writing about otaku while sitting in a maid café is that she is hiding from both school and family. In the end, it takes a hybrid Zen with its own hybrid language to help her.

Hybrid language has the power to knit cultural ideas as well as to express rift and displacement. Ch’ien writes of how Maxine Hong Kingston’s “knowledge of bilingualism thus helps her to see language as an open system, one that invites modification as well as translation.”<sup>256</sup> The example Ch’ien gives is of how Kingston’s book *China Men* took the slur “chinamen” and reframed it. By awarding it capitalisation and two words, Kingston transformed the slur into something to be proud of. Ozeki performs a similar act by allowing Nao to create the word “supapawa.”<sup>257</sup>

Nao is struggling with depression after bullying, but is comforted by her Buddhist nun grandmother. She teaches Nao to meditate, but rather than give her a Japanese word for meditation she calls it Nao’s supapawa. “She was talking in Japanese, but she used the English word, superpower, only when she said it, it sounded like supah-pawah. Really fast. Supapawa.”<sup>258</sup> At first Nao is skeptical of this. It seems ridiculous. The translation of the word superpower into accented English is strange and the connotations of superpower are childish. Nonetheless, as the

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<sup>255</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 422.

<sup>256</sup> Ch’ien, *Weird English*, Kindle Locations 1165–1166.

<sup>257</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 176.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 176.

book continues, the word takes on its own life. The time in America has made her a foreigner in the homeland of her parents. By offering her a partially American term, her grandmother gives Nao a word that speaks to her experience. The transformation from superpower to supapawa is key, because the new word allows Nao to build her own meaning into it. When Nao sits zazen (a zen Buddhist form of meditation) she calls that cultivating her supapawa. When Nao shaves her head to look like a nun's, she calls that a supapawa too. When she stands up to bullies, she calls that her superpawa.

The idea of the superhero was popularised in America during World War II. Even before Pearl Harbor, Captain Marvel was clobbering Japanese soldiers.<sup>259</sup> While Zen practice is a very Japanese form of Buddhism, the two might at first seem essentially opposed. Ch'ien argues that Kingston's writing, "Chinese American language, reveals the performance of cultural invention, and the re-formation of culture."<sup>260</sup> In the word supapawa, Ozeki performs a similar act of cultural invention by using hybrid language to express an open and hybrid Buddhism. As mentioned earlier, Ozeki's own Zen practice came via Norman Fischer, an American Buddhist who studied poetry at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.<sup>261</sup> By calling it a supapawa, rather than simply sitting zazen, Ozeki is tracing the hybrid history of the Buddhism she practices and which informs the outlook of the whole novel. This is a partially American Buddhism certainly, but it is committed to serious philosophy and spiritual practice unlike those shallower texts of the Zen boom such as *Zen and the Art of the SAT*.

By reading Ozeki's text and seeing how hybridity permeates it from the historical to the syntactical to the expitextual, we see how deeply committed her writing is to notions of hybridity. And we see how Zen allows both Nao and Ruth to handle their troubles navigating

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<sup>259</sup> Gina Misiroglu, Peter Sanderson, and Michael Eury, "Superhero," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/art/superhero>.

<sup>260</sup> Ch'ien, *Weird English*, Kindle Locations 1043–1044.

<sup>261</sup> Poetry Foundation, "Norman Fischer," Poetry Foundation, accessed July 4, 2017, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/norman-fischer>.

hybridity. Ozeki's hybrid Zen holds the disparate literary influences, linguistic references, and ideas in the novel together. Simultaneously she presents a form of Zen that contains hybrid possibilities—Ozeki's Zen has room for ghosts, tweaks of translation, and of course supapawas.

# Conclusion

This essay has focused on one novel and how hybridity manifested in that single work. By reading Ozeki's hybridity in terms of the particular traditions manifested in her work, her philosophy of hybridity as part of Zen interconnectedness becomes clear. This is apparent in her choices of structure, language, and subject matter as well as in the works that she references and is influenced by. *A Tale for the Time Being* is an I-novel; it is metafiction; it uses paratexts, hybrid words, Buddhist texts, and European philosophy. Each aspect is essential to the whole, and each aspect contains its own version of hybridity. The I-novel has been viewed as the most Japanese of forms. Ozeki, working in another country and across genres, shows us how the I-novel can be Japanese, and simultaneously Canadian and American and this literary hybridity is understood through a lens of a Buddhism that is equally hybrid.

*A Tale for the Time Being* is not the platonic example of a hybrid text from which all other texts can be understood. Without Ozeki's Buddhism, her hybridity might carry very different implications. In Chapter Two, this essay examined Ozeki's use of the semi-autobiographical self. The semi-autobiographical self has been used by many other writers, from Lucia Berlin, to Karl Ove Knausgaard, to Tao Lin, to Paul Auster. But by tracing Ozeki's specific influences—Zen Buddhism, metafiction, and the I-novel, we understand the particular autobiographical self Ozeki is presenting. Like Ozeki, Hitomi Kanehara has written a semi-autobiographical book, set partially in Tokyo, influenced by non-Japanese literature. Kanehara's novel is called *Autofiction*. Dominique Jeannerod describes autofiction as participating in “Transgressive relationships between fiction and biography.”<sup>262</sup> In Kanehara's novel this transgressiveness manifests in a narrative where the truth seems unstable and ever-fluxing. The narrator frequently lies and is

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<sup>262</sup> Dominique Jeannerod, “French Studies: Literature, 2000 to the Present Day,” *The Year’s Work in Modern Languages* Studies 71, no. 1(2009): 212.

uncertain of even the most basic facts. She cannot tell if the man sitting near her stinks or if “it’s just my nose deceiving me.”<sup>263</sup> Kanehara’s novel emphasizes instability while Ozeki’s, interconnectedness. *Autofiction* without this interconnectedness hybridity, is presented as part of world disintegrating with confusion. One hybridity cannot and should not be treated as equivalent to another. But by examining the strategies and philosophies a writer employs it is possible to see what version of hybridity they are promoting.

Ozeki’s book ends slowly. First an ending, then the appendixes, then a bibliography (one which both reminds us of metafiction and which appears to be an actual list of books referenced in the novel), and then the acknowledgements. The appendixes, bibliography, and acknowledgements all speak to an interconnectedness of texts and of subjects. Each is a distinct way of listing and acknowledging the influences that together create this hybrid work. The first appendix is on Zen Moments. The first person acknowledged is her Buddhist teacher Norman Fisher. And the first bibliographic reference is Paula Arai’s *Women Living Zen: Japanese Soto Buddhist Nuns*. Not all hybrid novels will be so transparent in their hybridity but each reading warrants attention to its specific bibliography, even if that bibliography is not so explicitly staked. Critically we may not agree with or value all hybrid works or works by hybrid novelists, but by evaluating the work on its own terms we can comprehend the model of hybridity it represents.

The very last line of Ozeki’s acknowledgements is: “I bow to you all.”<sup>264</sup> In five words, she acknowledges her religion, her cultural history (the practice of bowing is Japanese, the language is English), and her emphasis on the role of the reader. To bow is a sign of respect, in this case the respect that Ozeki tries to convey to anyone reading these acknowledgements. I hope that when approaching hybrid texts we too can act with respect. It requires respect to treat each work and author as specific with specific philosophies and influences.

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<sup>263</sup> Kanehara, *Autofiction*, 65.

<sup>264</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 422.



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# Appendix

## Interview

[Note—Personal exchanges and some small errors of speech such as um, or sentence-false starts were removed from this transcript for the ease of reading. The clean version was sent to Ruth Ozeki who then made some edits, which resulted in this final version.]

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan = RHB

Ruth Ozeki = RO

RHB I found a note that you wrote on the Canongate website where you described this novel that you were going to write, that's called *A Tale for the Time Being: An I-novel*. And I noticed that when it was published, it was published as *A Tale for the Time Being: A novel*. And I was just wondering, was that a writer decision? An editorial decision? Or something else entirely?

RO I don't remember what I wrote on the Canongate website; that's funny! We did play with the idea of calling it an I-novel, which I thought it would be kind of funny, because of iPhones and i-everything! Right?

It wasn't the Canongate decision as much as it was a US Viking-Penguin decision. In any case, we all decided that since most people don't really know what an I-novel is, that it just seemed a little confusing. And so, I think we just decided to leave that out. It is a pretty obscure Japanese genre, I think, even now. So that was it, more than anything else, that people weren't familiar with it and it would be confusing.

RHB That makes sense. In your head, is it an I-novel, or not?

RO Well, it is! It's hard, though, to say what an I-novel is exactly. It's certainly not an I-novel in the traditional Japanese sense of *watakushi shōsetsu*, but maybe... I don't know! Sure! Why not? And I think it is! The way I think of it is there's the Ruth and Oliver story, which is, I'd say, almost half of the book. That was a late addition. It took a while for me to get to that, to actually decide to step into the fictional world as a character, as a semi-fictional character.

And the character of Ruth in the book is a blocked novelist living on a remote island in British Columbia in Desolation Sound. She's trying to write a memoir, and she's failing to write a memoir. And the way I look at it is: how does a novelist fail to write a memoir? Well, she fictionalises, right? That's what novelists do. And so, novelists are incapable of really telling the truth. And so, it would make sense, then, that the memoir *becomes* the novel, it becomes the novel itself. So, that's how I was playing with it; that's how I was thinking about it, that the Ruth half of the book is the failed memoir. It's a little bit more post-modern than the original Japanese I-novel is, but, of course, that wasn't really modernity either, when they were writing...

RHB That's actually really interesting because one of the things I noticed is that it does have a lot in common with the I-novel, but it also made me think of non-Japanese metafiction. I was thinking of Nabokov when I was reading all your footnotes.

RO Yes!

RHB Were you thinking of those sorts of writers as well?

RO I was! And, in fact, it's really because of that that I resisted stepping into the novel and using myself as a character. When I first started writing the book back in 2006, I knew that... The first part of the book that came to me was the voice of the young girl, Nao. And I knew that Nao was writing a diary. And I knew that somebody would read the diary, that there would be a character who found the diary and who would read it and respond. It was always a tale that was going to be told in two parts.

What I didn't know is who her reader was going to be. For about the next four years, I kept trying out different readers in that role. They were very different. Some of them were young; some of

them were old... Male, female... A whole cast of different readers. And none of them worked! And it was only after the earthquake and tsunami happened in 2011 that I decided, at that point, to step into the novel, myself, as a character. Back in 2006 it did occur to me that since I'm the one who's sort of hearing the voice of this young girl and, in a sense, as the writer, I'm reading her diary, perhaps I should be... The character of the reader should be a character named Ruth.

And I remember I wrote about this in my process journal back then. I have an entry from back then; I think it was probably in 2007. I think I had that idea, and then 24 hours later I had rejected it, precisely because it felt so self-conscious and post-modern and metafictional, and something that Boy Writers do. And so, therefore, I felt like, maybe that's not such a great idea, right?

And so, I backed away from it. What's interesting is that in 2007, when I backed away from it, I think it was the right thing to do. It was not the right time to step in as a character. I don't think I would've really been able to do it. It was only after, as I said, after the earthquake and tsunami happened, that I felt that there was an urgency, or a need, to do it. The earthquake and tsunami broke the world. It was a real, a very real event that caused a rift in time. And suddenly, Japan was no longer the place that it had been, right? There was a sense that there was pre-earthquake Japan, and then there was also post-earthquake Japan.

And so, the book that I'd written up until that point just simply no longer felt relevant to me. And very much the same thing happened in New York after 9/11. There was a period of time after 9/11 where fiction writers, in particular, who had been writing about New York, simply couldn't anymore, without taking into account the events of 9/11. And I think the same thing happened in Japan.

This book that I'd been working on for about five years at that point simply couldn't be written in the way it had been written. And so, I was, at that point, about to give up. And I was talking about it with my husband, and he brought up this idea of stepping into it as a kind of semi-fictional character. He just pointed out that the events of 3/11 had broken the world and they had certainly broken the fictional world of my novel. And so, the way to address that was to address it directly. It was to step into the novel as a semi-real person, a semi-real character, which would allow the

fictional world to *stay* broken. It would allow that schism, or that rift to persist in the fictional world.

And readers, when they read it then, never quite know, is this real? Is this not real? And it also gave me, as a result, a way to talk very directly about the events of 3/11. And to talk about them, not in a fictional way, but in a real way. So, all of that to say that I did... I, of course, was thinking about the many writers who have inserted themselves into their fictional worlds. And it took me a while to be convinced that was really necessary.

RHB That's fascinating! Because just listening to you talk about it, and talk about how it, on one level, it's letting you do this almost playful trickster thing, but it's also letting you be really genuine.

RO Yes. That's a nice way of putting it. That's absolutely right. That's exactly right! It's a way of playing, but also, playing in a very serious way, you know?

RHB Yes.

RO And before... If it had just been the kind of razzle-dazzle metafiction for metafiction's sake... It wasn't interesting to me. It felt too self-conscious and too—what?—yes, self-conscious and annoying! But there was another reason for it. There was a justification for doing it that felt very urgent to me, and felt real.

RHB One of the things that I was thinking about is I know that in a bunch of your work you have, to a lesser extent, gestured to semi-autobiographical things?

RO Yes.

RHB *My Year of Meats* does and doesn't have some things in common with your life. And then, "Halving the Bones", which is beautiful.

RO Yes. I've always played with this. And I think you're, once again, absolutely right. This is something that I started playing with as far back as "Halving the Bones". There was another film, too, which is not really in distribution now, called, "Body of Correspondence," which does the very same thing. It's a line of inquiry that interested me as a filmmaker, when I was first making creative work

and put it out into the world. And I think I've just continued it in the novels.

In many ways, I think it partly comes from the... How do I explain this? That it's sort of tied up in identity issues and being a hybrid, a culturally and racially hybrid person, right?

RHB Yes.

RO I realised, I think, early on that I could never really just tell a story from one point of view. It really comes down to point of view. That for somebody who is culturally and racially hybridised, the singular point of view is never enough, right? It only tells part of the truth. Or, it only tells part of the story. As a result, I've always been attracted to stories that have multiple vantage points. And I remember, early on when I was watching, when I was growing up, the ensemble cast films always appealed to me. Like, Robert Altman was a filmmaker who early on was doing these wonderful ensemble pieces! And that always really appealed to me as a storytelling device.

So when I started to make work, I wanted to tell stories that... I remember when I was writing *My Year of Meats*, I tried at one point to make the character of Jane Takagi-Little I thought about making her just Japanese. And then, I also thought about making her just Caucasian-American.

And neither of them felt right to me. The thematic foundations of the book were dependent on this discussion of hybridity! And this is certainly true with *All Over Creation*, where, really, the book is very much about hybridity. That was so much more interesting to me to have a character who was hybrid. But then it brought up another problem, which is that as a mixed race person, if I write a mixed race character, there is no way that a reader is not going to assume that that character is an autobiographical character, right? This is not a problem that a white male American writer would ever face. A white male American writer can write about a white male psychopath, and nobody is going to assume that that psychopath is him. Whereas if a mixed race female writer writes about a mixed race female psychopath, then people are going to assume that there's an autobiographical element there, simply because of the cultural and racial specificity that the two, that the character and the author share.

This became clear to me, that there was no way to write a character who resembled me without

readers assuming that. So, in *My Year of Meats*, I dealt with that issue by playfully, again, making Jane six feet tall and giving her green hair. My idea was, this is so that people can tell, readers can tell me and Jane apart.

And it was a gesture towards addressing this problem. What was interesting about it... And, of course, people did! She and I shared not just a cultural background or racial background, but we also shared...

RHB Film-making?

RO A job description and many other things, right? And that was fine, that was all fine. In *My Year of Meats*, Jane ended up being a kind of a superhero. This was not really my intention, it just... That's where Jane and I were very different. I was not the superhero that Jane was.

And so, that started to irk me, when people started confusing me with Jane, at that point. So, in the next book, in *All Over Creation*, I went out of my way to make the mixed race character, Yumi Fuller, into a flawed protagonist. And she was a very flawed protagonist. Thinking that, if I create this deeply flawed character, nobody would ever... Readers would never think to ask me, *is this an autobiographical character?* Right? But, of course, that didn't work either, because they still thought it was an autobiographical... People still made that assumption. That identification between the character and the author...this really comes back to the question of I-novel. That if you are writing a character with whom you share a lot of cultural and racial and whatever other kinds of characteristics, then that assumption is just simply one that's going to be made. And so, I guess, in *A Tale for the Time Being*, I felt, in a way, like I was just crossing a line that I had established early on. And it was just the logical conclusion of this process that I'd been exploring all along.

RHB Yes. What I really love, actually, is that metafiction, or I-novels, are sort of a hybrid between fiction and non-fiction. And then, you have created a hybrid of two different hybrids! You know?

RO Right! Exactly!

RHB No. Yes. It's really lovely. And, I completely sympathise with the mixed race writer dilemma.

People asked, “Are all your stories going to have mixed race people in them?” And I was like, “Are all your stories going to have white people in them?”

RO Yes. Right! Exactly! It’s really true! What’s your background?

RHB I am a quarter Japanese, a quarter Chinese, and then, a bunch Anglo-Saxon.

RO Yes. That’s great! I’m half Japanese and a bunch Anglo-Saxon!

RHB It confuses publishers.

RO I know, right? I know! Then, I made things even more complicated by moving to Canada! So then, it just became like... What part of this is national? What are we talking about? Are we talking about nationhood? Are we talking about race? Are we talking...? It just gets so confusing!

RHB Yes. I know! Actually that reminds me... I was reading your essay in *Granta*. Where you make your own *renga*, and taking from the past and the present, and I was thinking, it reminded me of the hybridity in a different way of *A Tale for the Time Being*. And, I just, I wondered if creating hybrid forms is something you’re consciously working on, or whether it’s something that naturally comes out of who you are as a writer and a human in the world, or both.

RO I think it’s something that I’ve become conscious of, but I certainly wasn’t conscious of it early on. On the cover of *My Year of Meats*, there’s this quote from Jane Smiley. Jane Smiley wrote a review of *My Year of Meats* for the Chicago Tribune. And in it, she called it... she had this wonderful thing! Let me see if I can find it. Oh, I see the book over there! Hang on, just give me a second.

RHB Of course!

RO Oh! Here we go! Yes, here we go! It was funny; she, in the review, she called it a *comical-satirical-farcical-epical-tragical-romantical novel*.

RHB That’s perfect! That’s so perfect!

RO Right! And it was funny because I was delighted by this. I think that that was a kind of a slightly backhanded way of saying that I didn’t really know what I was doing. I think she was trying to

express her bafflement. So, it wasn't completely positive, right? It was a good review, but I think she was a little bit confused. But I thought it was wonderful because that's the kind of novel I want to write. That's exactly what I want to write.

Certainly I wasn't aware that that's what I was doing, but when I read that, I just felt this immediate sense of recognition. Lots of hyphens. Lots and lots of hyphens in there. The other thing—that's right!—the other thing I wanted to mention was just, in *My Year of Meats*, I use a lot of different formats in there, including things like... faxes.

Transcriptions of faxes, news articles, recipes, film scripts... There are various different textual formats used in the book. And that, I think, is something that came directly out of the film work that I'd been doing. In film, of course, montage is very common. And certainly, as a documentary filmmaker, montage is something that we're constantly relying on, textual evidence in documentaries in order to create stories. And there's almost a sense that if you can film an original document, e.g., then you're proving a point, right?

So, this creating faux documents, faux evidence and putting it into a fictional context was something that was interesting to me. And actually, in *My Year of Meats*, a lot of the information is real! It's factual.

This idea of using these different kinds of textual formats was something that came directly out of montage. And people would comment on it, readers would comment on it. And it didn't seem odd or unusual to me when I was doing it, but I do see that now, that it's... It was, perhaps, non-standard for novels. Not many novelists were working in that particular way.

All this to say that I became aware of these things *after the fact*, after I'd started using them. And now that I'm aware of them, I do look at it as an interesting area to explore. These are just tools in a toolbox, right? I think that I'll probably, to some extent, always use it. Though it's possible, too, that as I continue, I might be becoming a more traditional type of novelist, too. I don't know. Maybe the next thing I write will be super traditional.

RHB Super straightforward. Yes.

RO That would be so radical!

RHB I do love how you have actual critics like Fowler mentioned inside of *A Tale for the Time Being*. And JSTOR!

RO Oh, do I...? Did I mention JSTOR in there? I don't even...

RHB You have the formatting of it when you have the article about female I-novelists.

RO That's right.

RHB One of the things I wanted to ask you about is: in your Viking trailer, your book trailer, which I assume was filmed after you'd finished writing it, you act to yourself, which I thought was really interesting. And I wondered if, are you act Ruth, I think? And I was wondering if that affected how you felt about Ruth the character, or if it...?

RO Yes. No. I just always assumed that Ruth the character is a version of me. She's me. Why not? The way I felt about that character was that, even though I didn't actually find a diary washed up on the beach in a Hello Kitty lunchbox, the idea of a diary washed up on a beach in a Hello Kitty lunchbox did, in fact, wash up on the shores of my imagination. So, metaphorically speaking, Ruth, fictional Ruth's experience is very much like author Ruth's experience. It's like a mirror relationship, a distorted mirror, but they mirror each other, for sure, right?

RO Oh, yes. I see that. That makes sense.

RHB In the same way that when you step in front of the camera and use yourself in front of the camera, it's not me, it's a mirror image, it's me through a lens, right? And I've done that before. I did that in "Halving the Bones". And I'm quite comfortable stepping through and being on that side of the lens. I would never have used an actor in the same way that, for the audio book, I didn't want an actor used. I wanted to do the recording myself because it's me, you know?

RHB Yes.

RO For all intents and purposes, it's me. But the other thing, too, is that as a fiction writer, I really do

believe that *all* characters are me. I know that sounds terribly solipsistic and... Or narcissistic, but in a sense, who else are these characters? They come from me, right?

RHB Yes.

RO My characters come from me. Your characters come from you. They don't come from anywhere else. So, in a way, I feel like Nao is also me. And Haruki #2 is also me. Who else can they be?

RHB Yes.

RO In that sense, maybe all fiction is I-fiction. Maybe all novels are I-Novels.

RHB One of the things is: I have some friends who write non-fiction. And I always feel like the inverse of that, maybe, is: if you people were to say, well, yes—even if you're trying to honestly write about yourself, you're not doing the playful I-Novel thing—you're like, this is me, I was doing this thing, you end up creating a character anyway—no matter how honest you try to be. And so, it's odd that when you try to fictionalise, it's always you. And then, when it's you, it's always fictional.

RO Yes! Exactly!

RHB Yes. And, when you write more straight-up non-fiction—I'm thinking of the piece you wrote about looking at your own face for three hours—is that Ruth more or less fictional Ruth than, say, the Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being*? Or, it's the same on some level?

RO It's all about the contract with the reader. I think that the persona in the face is also... It's not fictional... But it's crafted, right?

RHB Yes.

RO In this contract with the reader, you're agreeing, when you're writing memoir, or when you're writing non-fiction, to tell the truth in a certain kind of way. And, when you're writing a novel, you're also, to my mind, agreeing to tell the truth in a certain kind of way, right? It's just that the difference is the way you choose to do it.

RHB A really smart critic names Tomi Suzuki, writing on the I-Novel, and says is that that an I-novel is

an I-novel if the reader believes it's an I-Novel?

RO Yes, that's great! Yes!

RHB You teach the reader what an I-Novel is, in the novel!

RO Yes! That's right! Exactly! And that was really fun, I have to say, in *A Tale for the Time Being*, just going there and doing exactly that! Teaching people what it is when they're in the process of reading.

Once again it's this kind of agreement that you make with the reader, but at the same time, it is a very highly-crafted attitude or stance, narrative stance that you're talking. And it's a narrative stance that exists in that moment in time.

And so, when I read that, when I read a face, e.g., I remember the person who wrote that. I remember *being* the person who wrote that. I remember she was a year younger than I am now, a year-and-a-half younger than I am now. She was visiting Berlin. She was spending a month in Berlin. I remember the apartment she was living in when she wrote that. That person is no longer, right?

RHB Yes.

RO That person isn't here anymore. So, is that me? I don't know. Of course, she's related to me, but she's also not me, you know?

RHB Yes.

RO So, the whole question starts to turn in on itself. And I think this is very related to the idea of time being. This is, at its heart, a very... Buddhist question. And the Buddhist sense of self is very different from a Western sense of self.

In Buddhism there is no fixed self; there is only time. There is only time being. And so, the idea of what's fictional, and, what's non-fictional, it dissolves when you start thinking about it that way.

RHB I remember when you talked at Wisconsin. You talked a lot about how Buddhism really was part of writing that book and was part of your writing process.

RO The book very much emerged out of the Buddhist practice that I was doing. This idea of *what is a time being* is at the heart of this question, of I-novel, too. Because I-novel is all about the self.

In Buddhism there's no fixed stuff at all. Again, there's no fixed entity called the self. The self is only this thing that emerges and changes through time. I always think of like this: there's something in particular about language that... if I were an artist, and I painted a self-portrait of myself, and I stood next to the painting and asked a viewer, which is me? Which is the real me? Nobody would ever mistake the canvas for me, right?

RHB Yes.

RO That's obviously a canvas, right? And I am obviously a human being, flesh and blood human being, right? But for some reason, as soon as you get into the realm of language, that no longer holds. We have this sense of language that somehow it's capable of representing the reality of a person, whatever that might be. The truth of a person. And it's just... It can't. It's a representation. It's a form of representation. And as such, it has to be *not* real, right?

[The formal portion of the interview ends here.]