

## Go Big Read author event with Ruth Ozeki

October 28, 2013

### Video Transcript

**Chancellor Rebecca Blank:** Good evening.

[ Pause ]

Good evening. I'm Rebecca Blank, the chancellor here at the University of Wisconsin. And I want to welcome all of you to what is definitely the largest book club meeting that I have ever been at.

[ Laughter ]

[ Applause ]

Discovering that Wisconsin has a Go Big Read program, an all campus book reading program, was one of the really great surprises when I arrived here on campus. I am a huge fan of these big community reading programs as a way to create shared identity and shared conversation. I immediately was handed a copy of the book and took it home with me and read it in the first week of August. And I have to say it was just a complete pleasure. And, I am so delighted to see how many other people here in this room have shared that pleasure in the last few months.

Tonight, we are all honored to welcome the author of *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth Ozeki, to the University of Wisconsin here in Madison. Ruth is an award-winning author and documentary filmmaker. And in this book, she has created not one but two compelling narrators. The culture and the experiences of a teenage girl in Tokyo and a struggling author in British Columbia intersect in surprising ways and ask us, as readers, to contemplate the nature and the meaning of time. The *Seattle Times* called the book "a dazzling and humorous work of literary origami."

This semester, at the University of Wisconsin, *A Tale for the Time Being* is being taught in more than 60 classes, in departments ranging from anthropology to physics. Associate Professor of English Timothy Yu is using the novel in his Modern American Literature course this semester, alongside books by Edith Wharton and Junot Diaz. Professor Yu says, "Ruth presents the story with the suspense of an unfolding mystery, and she's not afraid to take turns into the fantastic."

Across campus, many staff groups are also reading and discussing Ozeki's novel. At the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, best known for studying emotion and the brain, more than two dozen staff, scientists, and graduate students are participating in their own Go Big Read book club.

We gave copies of the book to more than 5,000 new students during Wisconsin Welcome Week in August, and we take some pride that we picked *A Tale for the Time Being* before it made the shortlist for this year's Man Booker Prize.

[ Applause ]

Ruth has some connections to Wisconsin that make her visit to the campus this week particularly special. Her father, Floyd Lounsbury, was born in Stevens Point. He came to the University of Wisconsin at Madison to earn a bachelor's degree in Mathematics. In 1939, he led a research effort, fueled by the Work Projects Administration, that produced detailed accounts of Oneida life. And he developed a 19-letter written alphabet of the tribe's language. He graduated in 1941 and served in World War II before returning to the University, where he received a master's degree in Anthropology in 1946. And the work of UW-Madison Anthropology Professor Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney was a resource as Ruth created the character of Nao's late great uncle, a kamikaze pilot. Professor Ohnuki-Tierney has studied and written about the letters and diaries of kamikaze pilots who were conscripted from Japan's top universities to fight in World War II.

Some of you, of course, already know that Ruth is an ordained Zen Buddhist priest. In the book, the character of Ruth discusses the Zen notion that each day is composed of more than six billion moments. We are pleased to have the chance to share some of those precious moments in our lives with the real Ruth tonight. So please join me in welcoming Ruth Ozeki, who has titled her talk tonight, "How to Be a Better Time Being", Ruth Ozeki.

[ Applause ]

[Ruth Ozeki takes the stage]

**Ruth Ozeki:** Thank you. Thank you so much.

[ Applause ]

Thank you.

[ Applause ]

Wow. Look at all of you. Thank you so much. This is a room full of wonderful time beings, so thank you for coming. And thank you Chancellor Blank for a wonderful introduction. It's a real honor and a pleasure to be here. And I just want to say how thrilled I was when I heard that *A Tale for the Time Being* had been chosen for the Go Big Read program. You know, the University of Wisconsin is a very important place in my own family narrative, because as Chancellor Blank mentioned, my dad was a student here. And so I thought I would start by telling you a little bit more about him. His name was Floyd Lounsbury, and he was born in 1914 in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. His father owned a small dairy

farm which he lost to bankruptcy during the Great Depression. His family was forced to sell the farm and move to Waukesha. Losing the farm just about broke their hearts, and his parents turned to religion for comfort, and they became evangelical Christians. You've heard about the Shakers and the Quakers and the Holy Rollers who shake and quake and roll. Yeah.

[ Laughter ]

My father's family were jumpers.

[ Laughter ]

When my dad was 18, he wanted to go to college, but no one in his family had ever been to college before. So they had no money. And so he went to his high school, his English teacher from high school, and borrowed five dollars from her, which he used to get himself all the way to Madison and enrolled in the University. Soon after his arrival on campus, he came across a natural history exhibition with rocks that were identified as being millions of years old. He was shocked. He had never seen geological evidence of the Earth's age before. He thought that the Earth had been created in seven days somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 years ago. And he suffered a crisis of faith, and decided to study science. He wanted to major in physics but he didn't have enough money for the lab fees, so he went into mathematics instead. You know, math is cheap.

[ Laughter ]

During the Great Depression, the American government created a program called the WPA or the Works Projects Administration. You may have heard of this program, and if you haven't, you should look it up. The WPA gave jobs to millions of unemployed people to carry out Public Works' projects like constructing bridges and parks, and roads, and public buildings. The WPA also employed musicians, and artists, and writers, and photographers, and scholars. And this was back in the day when the American government believed in helping communities and citizens rather than multinational financial institutions and corporations.

[ Applause & Laughter ]

Almost every community in the United States benefited directly from the WPA, as did millions of unemployed men, women, and college students like my dad. So, even without lab fees, in an inexpensive field like mathematics, five dollars didn't go far. And so my dad was doing odd jobs and waiting on tables at a local diner in order to support himself and send money home to his family. And he kept having to drop out of school because he couldn't afford to pay his tuition. Missing classes really bothered him, but during lunch hour some of the professors used to come to the diner with their students and lecture informally. One of them was a popular professor from the linguistics department. He used to hold court at the corner table in the restaurant where his students would gather while he told them about exotic lands and languages. And my father would sidle up and pretend to be wiping

down an adjacent table or refilling the salt shakers, but really he was listening. He had to be casual about it because some of the students were quite arrogant, he told me.

And this is how my father became interested in linguistics. He started sitting in on linguistics classes, keeping to the far back of the lecture hall, trying not to be noticed. And one of the classes he attended in American Indian linguistics was taught by a professor named Morris Swadesh. This was in 1938. And Swadesh had just received a grant from the WPA for a program he was developing called the Oneida Language and Folklore Project. His plan was to hire Wisconsin Oneida tribe members, train them in orthography and phonetic transcription techniques, and then send them back into their communities to interview and collect stories in the Oneida language from their elders. They would then transcribe the stories and later translate them into English, and get paid a living wage for doing so.

The Oneida workers were of course very happy with this project. Many of them had previously been working on road construction crews in the cold Wisconsin winter, and they were only too happy to come indoors and sit in a warm classroom and study. In 1939, Swadesh was informed by the University that his contract wouldn't be renewed, resulting in his departure from Madison just as the project was about to get underway. Knowing how desperate my dad was for money, Swadesh offered him the job of director of the Oneida Language and Folklore Project, and then left the entire project in my father's hands.

My father, who was 25 at this time and still an undergraduate, dedicated the next two years and then much of the rest of his life to fulfilling the project goals. In 1941, almost 10 years—after almost 10 years— my father finally graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a BA in Mathematics.

[ Laughter ]

He went to war, served in the Army, came back, earned his master's in Anthropology also from the University of Wisconsin, and then in 1949 he got his PhD from Yale. He wrote his dissertation on Oneida verb morphology. He taught linguistic anthropology at Yale for over 40 years, continuing his research in Iroquoian languages and making significant contributions in other fields, as well, including the study of kinship systems and the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphics and calendar systems. He was awarded a Sterling Professorship at Yale at the end of his long and distinguished career, and was made an honorary member of the Oneida nation.

So, the title of my talk today is "How to Be a Better Time Being." And I thought I would tell you a little bit about how I came to write *A Tale for the Time Being* and share some tips about time and life and the creative process. So why am I telling you all of this about my father? Well, as I mentioned, my dad graduated from this University, and I wanted to honor him and his connection with this place, which is also my connection with this place.

So that's tip number one, okay. In order to being a better time being, it's important to honor your ancestors and know where they come from, because that's where you come from, too. When I was

writing the story of my father, I started to think about all sorts of questions that I wanted to ask him: about how he felt waiting on tables at the diner, about the arrogant students, about why Swadesh lost his job, and about the Oneida. But my dad died in 1998, and it was too late to ask him. My situation is like Nao's in *A Tale for the Time Being*, wanting to write her old Jiko's life story but coming at it a little bit too late.

So this is my second tip for how to be a better time being. Be curious now. Be curious about your parents, and your grandparents, your siblings, and your cousins, your teachers, and your friends. Think of questions and ask them now. Because they are time beings and they will not be around forever.

The third tip I have for you is this. It's okay to take your time. It took my dad almost 10 years to graduate from the University of Wisconsin, but in those 10 years he found a career that he loved and a field of study that he could devote his life to. Many Native American and indigenous languages are now endangered or extinct. The work my dad did here, at this college, as a director of the WPA project, which was funded by the U.S. government, supported the Oneida people at a crucial time and helped them save their language from extinction. Saving things from extinction, be they languages, cultures, plants, birds, animals, ecosystems: this is a great thing for time beings to do.

And here's a fourth tip. Study the nature of time. Study geological time, so that you can recognize geological evidence and understand the difference between science and religious folklore. Study human time and human history, so that you know what's part of the historical record and can learn from it, but also so that you can notice what's not part of the historical record and learn from that too. It's important to pay attention to the things that dropped out of the historical record, what goes missing. For example, if you didn't know about the WPA project, you might make the mistake of thinking that bailing out big banks and financial institutions is the only way to address the problems of economic collapse.

[ Laughter ]

[ Applause ]

You might not realize that there are more egalitarian, creative, and humanitarian solutions like the WPA, which could be available to us too.

Another reason I wanted to tell you about my dad is that by telling you about him, I'm also telling you about myself. I'm a lot like him. My dad and I are both late bloomers. As time beings go, we're on the slow side. I didn't write my first novel, *My Year of Meats*, until I was 40. And I remember printing out the finished draft on the eve of my 41st birthday just before midnight so that I can honestly claim to have written my first novel by the time I was 40.

[ Laughter ]

Barely made it. *My Year of Meats* took me just over a year to write, and it was published in 1998. My second novel, *All Over Creation*, was published in 2003, and it took me about five years. My third novel *A Tale for the Time Being* was published in 2013. That's 10 years. So, one, five, ten. You see where I'm going with this.

[ Laughter ]

This is not an encouraging temporal progression, and I'm just hoping it's not a trend. Of course I was doing a lot of other things during that time, like taking care of my mother who had Alzheimer's, and studying and practicing Zen, and trying and failing to write several other novels and also a memoir. In fact, I didn't really start writing *A Tale for the Time Being* until 2006. But as it turned out, many of the things I've been trying and failing to do prior to this became part of this novel. This is the great thing about being a novelist: nothing is wasted. Everything you do, everything that happens to you, all your mistakes and failures, all your pain and suffering that accrue through time, all of this ends up being material for a novel.

So, why this book? Why this novel? Where did *A Tale for the Time Being* come from? Well, during this period that I was taking care of my parents, I was thinking a lot about time. I told you that my dad died in 1998. Before he died, I promised him I would take care of my mother. So my husband and I moved her to Canada to live with us, and for the next six years we watched her drop out of time very slowly, because that's what Alzheimer's does. It erodes memory and erases time. When people dear to you die, it changes your relationship to time and it makes you very aware that we're all time beings with a time limit.

My mother was Japanese and her family were Zen Buddhists. And during this period, I started practicing Zen seriously. Most of the time, we go through life very happily ignoring sickness, old age, and death, but sooner or later these things catch up with us. And Buddhism is very good at working with sickness, old age, and death. And I found that meditation practice helped me sit with my feelings and fears. And so I suppose you could say that I turned to religion for support too.

I was also studying the writings of a 13th century Zen Master named Dogen Zenji, who had a very beautiful and nuanced appreciation of time as a spiritual concern. One of his essays, entitled "Uji" in Japanese, struck me as being particularly interesting. So the Japanese word "Uji" comprises the Chinese character for being and the character for time. And it's usually translated as "time being" or "being time" or "for the time being." The English translation I was reading used the phrase "time being," which for some reason I kept reading as "time-being," as though it were a type of being, like a human being or an alien being. It had a funny kind of science fiction ring to it, sort of like a Time Lord from Doctor Who. And the phrase stuck in my mind and it really started me wondering, you know, what is a time being anyway? And before I knew it, that question transformed itself into the voice of Nao, the teenage protagonist of the novel, and this is what she said.

"Hi. My name is Nao, and I'm a time being. Do you know what a time being is? Well, if you give me a moment, I will tell you. A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be. As for me, right now I'm sitting in a French maid cafe in Akiba Electricity Town, listening to a sad *chanson* that's playing sometime in your past, which is also my present, writing this and wondering about you, somewhere in my future. And if you're reading this, then maybe by now you're wondering about me too. You wonder about me. I wonder about you."

So, characters usually come to me as voices. And when a character speaks in a voice as distinctive as this one, I know I have to pay attention. Certain things about Nao were clear to me right from the start. I knew that she was a schoolgirl, that she was a teenager, about 15 or 16 years old. I knew she was troubled and possibly suicidal, but I didn't know why. I knew she was sitting in Tokyo, in this crazy maid cafe in Akihabara and that she was writing a diary, and that the diary was somehow a key to her survival. I knew that she was Japanese but for some reason she was writing in English. So I—that was a bit of a mystery to me. Why is she writing in English? And finally, I knew that she was writing to someone, a reader who would find her diary in somewhat mysterious circumstances and become obsessed by it. The problem was that Nao didn't know who her reader was, and so of course neither did I.

I spent the next four years searching for the character of the reader. It was a bit like being a casting director, looking for the right actor to play a part. A character would come to mind and I would invite him in and arrange for him to discover the diary. He would start to read and react and I would watch and I would start to write. And then word by word, page by page, the fictional world would start to grow and inflate getting all around and plump and promising. Until one day maybe 50 or 100 pages in, I'd wake up and turn on the computer only to find that the world had gone flat like a punctured balloon. And so I'd thank the character, and usher him to the door, and invite the next one in, maybe a woman this time, and we'd start the whole process all over again. I did this about four or five times, starting and stopping and giving up in despair, until finally, in early 2011, I finally managed to complete a finished draft of the novel.

It wasn't a very good draft. It had a very different plot and very different readers and I knew it had serious problems, but I was impatient and I knew at least it was done. And perhaps my editor could help me sort out what was wrong with it. And then at the beginning of March, just as I was putting the finishing touches on the manuscript and was about to submit it, the Japanese earthquake and tsunami hit. And along with the rest of the world, I spent the next few weeks watching those horrifying images of the wave, obliterating towns and villages along the coastline and washing them out to sea. I have friends and family in Tokyo and in Sendai, and of course I was worried about them, but when the meltdown at Fukushima nuclear power reactor occurred, my worry turned global. The world was now a very different place. Japan was a different place. And slowly, it began to dawn on me that the book I've written was no longer relevant. I'd written a pre-earthquake, pre-tsunami, pre-Fukushima book, and we were now living in a post-earthquake, post-tsunami, post-Fukushima world.

As I watched this disaster unfold on the Internet and then the global media, I felt utterly powerless, as I'm sure many of you did too. It reminded me of how I'd felt during 9/11 as I watched the Twin Towers

fall. I was here in Wisconsin at that time. I'd just given a talk at the University and was visiting friends in the Driftless Area.

Wars, acts of terrorism, natural and man-made disasters, we watch these global events play out on the small glowing screens in the intimate spaces of our living room or on our laptops in bed. And on one hand it feels so personal, and on the other so remote. And either way, we feel helpless and powerless to do anything. This cognitive dissonance is just a feature of life in our mediated world.

So, how does one respond? In the wake of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown—this was the question I kept coming back to. How do I as a fiction writer, using the tools of fiction, respond to a catastrophe that's so real? And not only real but so immediate, so present. Despite the efforts of the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company to reassure the world that the situation was under control, it was clear that the meltdown at Fukushima was just the beginning of a crisis that would be ongoing. It would persist for decades if not centuries. And that's the problem with nuclear accidents. The effects don't go away.

There's very little that novelists can do to rectify the world. But at the same time, I feel it's important to try not to be entirely irrelevant. Since I could no longer stand behind the book I had written, I withdrew the manuscript from submission and spent the next few months talking it over with my husband, Oliver, trying to figure out what, if anything, I could do. And eventually he came up with an idea. He suggested that perhaps I could respond to this emergent reality in a more direct and immediate way by breaking the fictional container and stepping into the novel myself as semi-fictional character, by putting myself or at least a version of myself on the line.

Now, this may seem a bit transgressive for a fiction writer, but Oliver is a visual artist and I'm a former filmmaker. And in the world of film, and visual and performance art, artists appear in their own work all the time and nobody thinks anything of it. Oliver pointed out that I'd put myself and my films before and never felt squeamish about it, so why should this be any different?

It's an interesting question. When you look at a painter's self portrait you would never ask is that you? Of course it isn't. It's a painting, right? It's a representation. But for some reason with writing, we find it harder to make that distinction. We expect words to be capable of telling the truth in a way that paint and pigment can't, and this too presented an interesting challenge. So, I told Oliver that I thought it would be a good idea. But I pointed out that if I were going to be in the novel, then he would need to be in the novel too.

[ Laughter ]

Luckily, he agreed. He said it would be an interesting thought experiment.

So in May of 2011, I unzipped the manuscript and threw more than half of it away, and began to rewrite. The earthquake and tsunami became a central part of the storyline and it was one of the most intense writing experiences I've ever had. Six months later, I finished the novel.

So, that's more or less the story of how *A Tale for the Time Being* got written. And I just want to make it clear to any aspiring novelists who may be in the audience, I'm not recommending this.

[ Laughter ]

This is not an efficient way to write a novel. There are faster and more efficient methods. Some writers write a novel every year or two. Some novelists write several novels in a year. Can you imagine this? I actually know writers like this, and I'm even friends with them, and I tolerate their headshaking and pitying looks of incomprehension when I talked about my process because they are very nice people in spite of their prolific output.

[ Laughter ]

The fact is, I wish I could be a faster writer and a more prolific writer too, but I'm not. And there's not much I can do about this. I can only be the writer that I am. Writers are not created equally. We are time beings and we each have our own unique relationship with time. And books are time beings too. And each book has its own relationship with time. And given this is so, it occurs to me that we would all be a lot happier if we learned to improve our relationship with time. And the way I recommend doing this is to practice patience.

This is my fifth tip for how to be a better time being. Practice patience.

So you know the old adage "Patience is a virtue", right? You've all heard of this, "Patience is a virtue"? The problem is, is that it's actually not correct. Technically speaking, patience isn't a virtue, at least not in the western philosophical or theological traditions. It's not one of the four cardinal virtues, which are prudence, justice, temperance, and courage, from ancient Greek philosophy. And it's not one of the three theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity—either. But even if we decide to take the adage at face value and call it a virtue, there's another problem. It's branding problem. Patience isn't sexy. It lacks both the stalwart manly qualities of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage, as well as the gentle inspiring qualities of faith, hope, and charity. Because, face it, patience is really dull. If you knew that I was going to be lecturing tonight on the subject of patience, would you really have come?

[ Laughter ]

Of course not. You've got plenty of more interesting things to do. Patience is not only dull, it's also unfashionable. Patience doesn't sell. And I mean this quite literally. What sells is impatience. Commerce thrives on impatience. The engines that drive our economy train us to be impatient and expect instant gratification because delayed gratification is bad for business. Advertising exists in order

to encourage us to want things now. Internet shopping rewards impatient people with poor impulse control. And that's intentional, because patience is bad for our economy. It's anti-capitalist—which parenthetically is why practicing patience is perhaps one of the most deeply subversive things that you can do.

[ Laughter ]

Our technologically driven capitalist consumer culture is training us out of any naturally occurring patient habits of mind that we might have. And while this might not be a problem for consumers, it's a huge problem for serious creative and cultural producers: for writers, artists, and scientists, and philosophers, and scholars. Because creativity takes time. And it's hard. And there are no guarantees. I know this. I'm constantly meeting impatient aspiring writers who don't really want to write; they want to have written.

[ Laughter & Applause ]

And, don't get me wrong, I'm like that too. Most of the time I'm an impatient aspiring writer who wants to have written. So this holds true for most of us. So when I say practice patience, I don't mean to imply that impatience is a bad thing. Okay, let's be clear about that. Patience is not about eradicating impatience. That would be terrible, because impatience is necessary too. Without impatience, nothing would ever get done. We'd all be sitting around, gazing up at the clouds or down at our navels, patiently waiting for, you know, like, whatever.

[ Laughter ]

It's thanks to impatience, our need to know, our need to resolve our curiosity, that books get written and paintings get painted and scientific breakthroughs get made. Rilke, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, says, "I beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now because you would not be able to live them, and the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answers."

So I really love this quote. It points to a kind of generative, creative tension that emerges in the space between patience and impatience, between knowing and not knowing, between curiosity and resolution. And the trick then is to learn how to tolerate and live in the middle of this tension, without trying to resolve it prematurely or make it go away.

So, how do we do this? How do we practice patience? How do we learn to live the questions? How do we abide in the midst of this generative tension while staying awake and alert, open, curious about what's arising without expectation? How do we wait for anything and everything and nothing at all? This is tip number six, the last tip on how to be a better time being. Cultivate your superpower.

[ Laughter ]

Or perhaps I should say supah-pahwah.

[ Laughter ]

You all—I'm assuming that many of you have read the book.

[ Laughter ]

And if you haven't, now your interest is peaked, okay?

[ Laughter ]

You all remember what a supah-pahwah is, right? It's the practice of meditation that old Jiko taught now and Nao taught Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being*. It's very simple. Basically, you just sit still and get quite and bring your awareness to your body and your breath and then you just rest there. And when thoughts come, you notice them and let them go.

You know, people often think that meditation is about stopping thoughts or emptying the mind or achieving some kind of like tranquil, blissed-out state. And this might happen, and it's pleasant if it does, but it's not really the point. The point isn't to calm or empty the mind or to stop thoughts or to transcend them. It's much simpler and more realistic than that. It's really just a technique for making friends with your mind. You watch your thoughts and your feelings as they arise without getting hung up on them or carried away by them. And you start to develop a feeling for your mind, in a gentle, curious, and non-judgmental way.

You know, most of the time, we go through our days in a kind of mindless trance, moving from one thing to the next, taking care of business, doing e-mail, talking, texting, shopping, eating, working, you know, getting from one place to another. We're always moving forward in this relentless kind of way. We spend our present moments kind of leaning into the future or worrying about the past. We're chronically over stimulated. And I mean that literally, we're chronically over stimulated and we rarely give our mind a break or pay much attention to how it's doing. So, mindfulness meditation is a technique for kind of waking up from this trance. It taps the self-reflexive power of the mind to wake up and become aware of itself in the present moment. It's a way of fully being in time. And the thing about mindfulness meditation is that you can't really understand it just by thinking about it or by talking about it. You have to actually do it. So this is what I propose we do next.

[ Laughter ]

Just for a couple of minutes. Are you game? Are you up for this? Okay, good. Good. Okay, so, I'm going to step away from this and hopefully I've got a little mic on here so hopefully you'll be able to hear me. What I'd like you to do is to take everything that's on your lap and put it on the floor. So you don't have anything in your hands or in your lap.

[ Noise ]

Okay.

[ Pause ]

And I'm going to sit down. But don't worry, because you're going to have your eyes closed. And I'm going to have my eyes closed too. Okay, so the first thing is, sit in your seat. And it might help to kind of move forward to the front of your seat a little bit, so you're sort of sitting at the edge of your seat. And that way you're not leaning back against the chair in, you know, kind of a relaxed way. You're actually sitting up. You're holding yourself upright, and that's a kind of a nice feeling. We don't do this very often. So you're holding yourself upright, okay, and feeling the sort of strength of your spine and feeling your—there's maybe a little bit of an arch in your back. You all feel that? And you can put your hands on your knees and put your feet kind of in a nice grounded way on the floor. And then as you're sitting up straight, I'm going to ask you to just close your eyes.

And now, with your eyes closed, just really get a sense of your body in this space. And you might want to just very gently rock backwards and forwards a little bit, and maybe just from side to side. Just a little bit, to get a sense of your balance and once again, a sense from the inside of your body, you know, what it feels like to be sitting here.

And then once you've found a nice stable position, just, very—in a very gentle kind of way, bring your awareness to the top of your head. And just feel the top of your head, see if there's any sensation there at all. Bring your awareness very lightly there. Maybe you can feel a little breeze on your face.

And then just very gently allow your awareness to kind of drop down through your forehead, your eyes, your jaw. Any tension that you find in these areas, just take a moment to relax it. We carry a lot of tension in our foreheads, carry a lot of tension in our jaw, just take a moment to really relax that. And then allow your awareness to drop further down through your mouth, your chin, your neck, and your shoulders, and take a moment here once again. An area where we carry a lot of tension especially people who are working at computers, just take a moment and maybe move your shoulders around, and then really relax, letting go of any tension that you might feel there.

And then, allow your awareness to drop down to your arms, elbows, forearms, your palms. Take a moment to feel, perhaps the temperature; there might be a little heat, where your palms are making contact with your knees. Let's take a moment to feel that.

[ Pause ]

And then bring your awareness back up to your chest. And take a deep breath here, and just feel what the breath does to your chest: how it expands, and then contracts, and then follow the breath down, down into your lungs, down into your rib cage, all the way down into your stomach. And here, too, take a moment to really just relax. Let all of the muscles in your stomach relax. This is a place we carry a lot of tension and we very rarely have a chance just really relax that.

Nobody is looking. Everyone's got their eyes closed, so just relax your stomach.

And then allow your awareness to move down into your legs. Feel the pressure of the chair against your back. Allow your awareness to just move down to your knees, your chin, and then to your feet. Feel the place where your feet making contact with the earth, the floor. And now just allow your awareness, your tension, to fill your whole body.

[ Pause ]

Just checking in various places, just looking for any place you might be holding tension. Just touch those places with your mind, with your awareness, and relax. Now, bring your awareness very gently to your breath and just try to follow the breath with your mind as it comes into your nose, down into your chest, into your lungs. Turns inhale it—inhalation turns into an exhalation and moves back out again. And very gently, just allowing that awareness to rest on your breathing, we'll just sit quietly like this for a few more minutes, keeping your awareness on your breath very gently. And if any thoughts come it's not a problem, just recognize in [phonetic] your thinking and allow the thought to go, and return your attention back to your breath. We'll just sit like this for another minute or so.

[ Pause ]

And then when we're finishing, just keeping your eyes closed. Just once again, just keep rocking roughly, gently forward and back and to side to side, just to bring movement and awareness back into your body. And then whenever you're ready, just very gently open your eyes and keep them downcast it or—open your eyes and back, to the room.

[ Pause ]

So, how was that?

[ Applause ]

Nice.

[ Applause & Laughter ]

Thank you. Thank you. You know, it strikes me that when you do something like this, I mean what an amazing privilege it is to sit in silence in a room of what, 1200 people, 1300—something like that, right? I mean, that's a very powerful—it's a very powerful feeling and I certainly felt it, and I hope you did too. How many of you found that was easy? Raise your hand. Okay, about half of you. How many of you found that was difficult? Okay, a few of you. Okay, good. How many of you felt comfortable? Okay. And uncomfortable? Little awkward, little like “uhh”? Okay. How many of you felt you were doing it right?

[ Laughter ]

How many of you felt you were doing it wrong?

[ Laughter ]

OK. OK, good, good. How many of you felt your mind was like really jumpy? Like, jumpy, you know? OK. And anybody feel, like, sleepy? Anybody fall asleep?

[ Laughter ]

Is anybody still asleep?

[ Laughter ]

Good. All right, good. Did anyone feel that time was passing slowly? Anybody feel that time was passing really slowly like, "Oh my God, when this is going to be over" kind of slowly? Yeah, OK. And, how many people felt like that was just like really fast? The time passed really quickly? Anybody? OK, good, good, good. This is all exactly right. This is all perfect, OK? Everything that you experienced is perfect. Whatever happened, whatever you experienced, all of this is exactly what mindfulness meditation is for you today, right? There's no right way of doing it or wrong way of doing it. And, you know, when you do it, you can approach it with this kind of very open, accepting, nonjudgmental way.

It's really—it's an interesting practice. It's a way of becoming intimate with your mind. And it's a way of taking care of your mind and keeping your mind open and flexible. And I think in a way, you can almost call it a kind of mental hygiene, sort of like brushing your teeth, right. You would never think twice about brushing your teeth but, you know, for some reason meditation is this thing that we have to, you know—it's this big thing, but it doesn't have to be. It can be something very, very simple. It's just noticing what—you know, noticing what's happening in this very gentle, nonjudgmental way and then returning to the breath. It's a way of becoming comfortable with what is, no matter what that might be.

And in Zen we sometimes call this the backward step, because it allows us to step away from the constant stream of noise and thoughts and anxieties, and practice patience, because that's what this

really is: a way of resting in this more spacious awareness of the present moment which is after all where life is happening, where life is happening now, where life is happening for the time being, so.

That's what I have to say to you tonight and thank you very much for your patience. And I think we're going to have time for question and answer too. But thank you for your patience.

[ Applause ]

Yeah. I'll turn this over to you then.

**Timothy Yu:** Good evening everyone. Thank you again for being here. My name is Timothy Yu. I'm a professor here in the English department and the Asian American Studies program. I'm also the director of the Asian American Studies program here.

And, I will be moderating the question and answer session with Ruth Ozeki.

So, you will notice that we have two microphones set up here at the front of the room, one at the head of each aisle. So, if you do have a question or thought that you'd like to share with Ruth Ozeki, I would invite you to please come up and please just line up in front of these microphones. I know we do have a lot of people here but we will try to get as many questions as we have time for. And, so I actually would like to start— as people are sort of working up the courage to come to the mic—please don't be shy— with a question of my own—

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah.

**Timothy Yu:** —and also I will try to work in a couple of questions that we gathered through the Go Big Read website.

But—Well, Ruth, in a way you already answered part of my question, and it's fascinating that happened earlier today too, when people would stand up and say, "I have this question and you already it answered it." So, you seem to have this way of anticipating. But my question is about the sort of characters of Ruth and Nao and sort of how they interact. And you told a wonderful story about how Nao's voice sort of triggered the book but then you worked—had to work for a long time to understand, you know, who the other kind of voice was going to be.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Timothy Yu:** So, what I'm really interested in as we read through the book, it's almost as if we're kind of reading Nao's diary, but we're also reading it alongside Ruth or through Ruth. And Ruth serves almost as a kind of intermediary, sometimes literally as a kind of interpreter. And so, I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about, you know, what it meant for you to sort of put Ruth in this position of the reader, sort of in our position, right, as the person who's reading the book. And what that, you know,

changed about the book, what that added to the book, that might not have been there if we say just heard Nao speaking directly on her own?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Right. Well, I think that in a way the book is, you know, it's a story. If there's one story and, you know, one relationship in the book, it's the relationship between reader and writer. And Nao of course is the reader, right, and Ruth—no, sorry, I got that wrong. Nao is the writer—which book is this?

[ Laughter ]

Nao is the writer and Ruth is the reader. And so, I have this idea that, you know, that Nao had this—she had this voice that kind of came to me in this very strong way, and that somehow she had the confidence of the young writer, that young writers often have, of sort of casting her voice out into the world and almost calling, you know, calling the reader into being. And, as a writer, this is an experience that I really understand. You know, I understand this deeply, because that's exactly what calls me into being as a novelist. I'll hear a character's voice and, you know, I'll start to listen to it and get interested in it and I have to respond in some kind of way. Sometimes I almost think of it as if the characters are kind of out there in some kind of parallel world. You know, they're kind of out there floating around in some Pirandellian soup, you know, up there. And, you know, and they look down here the clouds and they see, you know, kind of an unsuspecting novelist walking by and they think, "Oh, there goes one," and then, you know, kind of swoop in and, you know, and parasitize my brain.

So, it's—but it's this kind of reflexive relationship of the reader and the writer, in a way, kind of co-creating each other which is very much the way that I think of the writing process. I mean, because as a writer, I know that I can only do half of the work. I can—you know, I can write whatever I want and I cast it out into the world, right. But then what you make of it is completely out of my control. And in fact, the way I think of it, it's a kind of a many worlds experience, because of course the book that you read is going to be completely different than the book that *you* read, which is going to be completely different than the book that somebody else read, right?

And so, when you think about it, there's actually at least—you know, as far as I know 1200, 1300 different versions of *A Tale for the Time Being* out there in the world, just in this room, right. And that's kind of an amazing that, you know, it's that collaborative nature of—or that co-creative nature of writing that is interesting to me, of course, as a writer. And so that's what I think, you know, by putting my, you know, a version of myself into the story, I was able to kind of talk about that reflexivity in an interesting kind of way.

[ Inaudible Remark ]

**Timothy Yu:** I'm sorry I have to sort of awkwardly step up to the podium every time. I want to respond but no, thank you. And one thing I found that was so interesting about what you just said was that you've been talking in your talk about awareness, mindfulness, and I found that as a reader, I was much more mindful of my own reading experience—

**Ruth Ozeki:** Oh, yeah, yeah.

**Timothy Yu:** —because Ruth was there sort of as a reader and I was looking at Ruth's struggles trying to understand what, you know, for looking for Nao and of course, you know, we as readers have that same experience as we're reading the book, and the book itself is kind of reflecting that back to us. So I think it really gives us a wonderful sense of awareness as we're reading.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Nice.

**Timothy Yu:** Yeah.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Nice, nice. That's great.

**Ruth Ozeki:** So, okay, looks like we do have a couple of people. So, if you'd like to go ahead and just step up and ask your question.

**Audience member:** Thank you so much. Several of my book club friends were discussing it dinner tonight the subject of bullying in your book. And we have about 20 questions.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah.

**Audience member:** So, I guess the question I would ask would be more—could you comment on that subject? And I don't quite know how to pose the question. It was such a deeply upsetting, and sad, and dark episode in the book, especially the bathroom scene. We want to know a lot of things, like, is this out of your experience, is this Japanese, do you regard this an American experience too? Was this a fantasy to express some kind of evil in teenagers? I don't even know how to propose the question, but it was a really great exploration of something dark to the fullest extent. And that moved me, and I was wondering if you could comment on that subject.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Sure. Maybe I should stop up the podium to get in.

**Timothy Yu:** Sure.

**Ruth Ozeki:** So, the subject of—you know, the subject of bullying, I knew right from the beginning that Nao was struggling with this that, you know, that things had happened. I've been following stories from the Japanese press for the last, you know, probably since the mid '90s. Stories in particular that link high school bullying with suicide and, you know, these are stories that, you know, that have been coming out in the media in Japan for quite a while now. And, there was something about this that was very upsetting to me. And I knew that I wanted to explore it in writing. I knew I wanted to write about it.

I think that a lot of my books are about bullying in one form or another, be a corporate bullying or, you know, different kinds of power relationship imbalances. But this was a subject that I hadn't quite—you know, I hadn't looked at yet. I have to say too that when I was thinking about this was in the early part—it was in the post 9/11 period. And I was living in Canada at the time, and watching politics unfold down here. And, I was very aware—my Canadian friends took—you know, were always constantly pointing this out to me—that America really is a bully culture, and that, you know, the tone of politics during the early part of this last decade, the previous decade was a kind of very bullying tone. And so, I was interested in that too, because I do believe that we—you know, that children learned to bully from somewhere, you know, that this isn't—you know, children don't do this entirely on their own. This is something that they learn.

So, these were all things that were kind of interesting me at the time. The other thing that interested me was over the years I had noticed that things that had become a cultural trend in Japan would very often surface in North America several years later. And I was wondering whether or not the bullying, and particularly this kind of cyber bullying-suicide connection, would start to surface here. And in fact, as we know in—well, in Canada this past year there have been two young women who've been sexually abused, molested, raped, and there—you know, the images of this have been posted on, you know, on Twitter, and the girls have committed suicide as a result.

So, this is something that is not just happening in Japan. People have talked about it in Japan, I think, you know, earlier on, but this is something that's happening in North America too. It's also—I mean I think it's happening—I think it's happening everywhere. One of the things that's been very moving to me are the letters that I get from readers, and especially young readers, who have—and this is really from all over the world who talked about how—and tell me the stories of how they've been abused and bullied. And so, I don't think that it's—although in the book, yes, it's very upsetting but it's not as upsetting as the letters that I'm—you know, and e-mails that I'm getting from young women all over the world, and I'm sure young men too.

So, you know, just to put it in some kind of context, I don't think that it's a Japanese problem. I think it exists in Japan. And I think that, you know, there're certain things about Japanese hierarchical structure that perhaps makes it more apparent there. But I think it— unfortunately, I think this exist everywhere.

**Audience member:** Thank you.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah, thank you.

**Audience member:** Hi, thank you for coming, it's really an honor. My question is actually very much related to that. And I haven't been planning on asking this question until the last moment of this meditation that we did together and this discussion of your comments about recognizing and then releasing. And it really brought back to me that one of the most difficult passages from the book is this rape scene that occurs in the bathroom, in which Nao doesn't resist. What happens? She taps into this superpower. And thinking about how violence really is such a strong theme throughout this book on so

many different levels: there's the violence inflicted against other individuals, there's the violence inflicted on the self, others through suicide or cutting or other acts, there's the violence on the environment, there's so many different layers of violence. I mean, what is—what are we to take from this message and its connection to surrender, or meditation, or resistance, or active fighting, with all these different levels of violence that we—that the characters face and that we become so intimate with through this reading?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Well, I think we do. That's the great question. I think, you know, we do live in a very violent culture. I don't see how we can deny that. I mean, when you look at the images that, you know, in film, on television, *Breaking Bad*, you know, great television but very, very violent. And, you know, this is a reality. We live in a very, very violent media culture. I certainly wouldn't—you know, my intention is not to advocate surrender at all. But it is—my intention certainly is to advocate waking up, and being aware of this and talking about it. And, you know, noticing that, really understanding that this is happening. And Nao, I mean she's a young girl, she didn't—you know, hopefully her ability to deal with this kind of things will improve as she gets older.

So, the message here is certainly not, you know, to surrender passively. I don't think that she would agree with that either. But, you know, it is more just this—you know, overall, this invitation to look at these things and to not, you know, to not—to understand that this is happening and to wake up to the reality of that. I mean, I think that so much of what we see we don't really see, right? I mean, so much of the violence in media messaging now, we just have stopped seeing that. And that to me is a problem, so to try to try to look at that in some other kind of way.

[ Inaudible Remark ]

**Audience member:** Hi, can I ask a question on somewhat different topic? I was wondering, in the book, you kind of present the characters in three different languages, English, Japanese, and French, but also some references to German and Greek philosophy. And I was wondering how you use those languages linguistically to represent the different characters?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Well, it's an interesting question. I think that one of the things in the book that was very interesting to me was the—and in the world too—is the way that languages influence each other. And they—you know, we cross pollinate all the time. And certainly that very much the case in Japanese, there's all of the—you know, there's so much language, borrowed language, from German, from French, from English that appears in Japanese spoken language now, and in written language too. And so that's something, as a Japanese speaker, that's always been very interesting to me. I'm also the child of linguists. So, you know, I think this is a kind of genetic predisposition I have to look at—you know, to look at language as a form of characterization.

You know, the Ruth character in the book is different from me, the Ruth character standing here in front of you. And, Ruth in the book doesn't know very much about Japanese pop culture, Japanese slang, all

of that. I actually do know quite a bit more than she does. So, you know, in that sense, Ruth's, you know, ignorance about these things tells more about, you know, the character in the book.

But the—you know, one of the things that was so interesting to me about Professor Ohnuki-Tierney, she's a professor in the anthropology department here. She wrote this book called *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms*, that was her first book. And her second book was *Kamikaze Diaries*. She's written more, but those are the two that I was interested in. One of the things that was so interesting to me was the extent to which these young men who were conscripted to be pilots in the Tokkotai, in the Kamikaze, they were incredibly well educated. And they spoke and read three or four different European languages. And they'd read French philosophy and German philosophy and poetry and they were very, very cosmopolitan young men and they were—you know, they were some of the most intelligent people in Japan at the time. Completely unlike the stereotype of the crazy suicide Kamikaze fighter thing that we have. And so, one of the things that I was very interested in was to use that and to kind of take that stereotype and change it, and to look at it, and examine it and to take that apart a little bit.

So, that certainly is another way that I, you know, that I was able to bring, you know, French and German philosophies sort of into that to kind of counteract that stereotype. Yeah.

**Audience member:** Hi. I have someone in my life who has Alzheimer's.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. I'm sorry.

**Audience member:** And so, I was thinking about that during reading your book and about something about being in the present and how when you talk to somebody with Alzheimer's you can't talk about the past exactly, or the future, you're in the present, and something about memory, that I kind of took out of your novel, and what does that mean and how important is that. So, I guess I wanted to ask you a little bit to put that together in your thinking as you were writing this, about how that intersected for you?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Well, I think you're absolutely right. You know, I took care of my mom. She had Alzheimer's. I took care of her about five—for about six years. And, one of the things that you learn quickly is that, you know, you just avoid references to the days of the week, or the hour, the time, or all of those kinds things because they don't—they're meaningless. You know, they're completely meaningless, and it's just upsetting. So, you kind of enter this strange almost, you know, suspended in time kind of place, when you're sitting with and caring for somebody with Alzheimer's. And, one of the things that really was impressive to me was I suddenly realized, well, it actually—why does it matter that it's Tuesday or Monday or—you know, it doesn't matter that it's Monday today, it's completely irrelevant. Who came up with this anyway?

[ Laughter ]

It completely shifted my notion of what time is, and what calendars—you know, who are calendars serving? Who does time serve? It doesn't really necessarily serve us. It serves—well, it serves the, you know, railroads. And in fact that's when—you know, that's when clocks as we know them were really developed, in order to facilitate transport of commercial goods and services, right? So, it's—you know, who's behind this, anyway? There's this very, very good book called *A Sideways Look at Time*, by a wonderful writer named Jay Griffiths. And she's really brilliant. And she does a wonder—she just dissects all of the sort of power hierarchies behind time as we know it, right. She does a great job.

But—you know, so in terms of, you know, this idea of Alzheimer's, and things dropping out of memory, you know, this was something that I was going through personally in my own life. I was dealing with this. But, you know, as an old school feminist, I'm also very aware that—you know, and I talked about this at beginning of the talk—one of the reasons it's important to try to remember history and to learn history is because we really need to be aware of what does drop out of the historical record. And once again, I mean, women's voices, this is certainly something that anybody who studied feminist theory kind of understands this, that, you know, that there are sort of huge swathes of historical record that simply don't exist.

And this brings to me one of the things that is very interesting to me, and that I was studying and reading about when I was writing the book. It's a field of study called agnotology. Do people know about this, agnotology? It's— yeah, of course you would. It's used in the history of science—in the history of sciences a lot. In a way it's a kind of—it's the mirror image of epistemology. It's not the study of knowledge. It's the study of ignorance, okay, and in particular, manufactured ignorance. You know, what goes into manufacturing ignorance. And so, why these things—you know, why are there holes in our historical record? Why are there these great pockets of ignorance? You know, well, this is what agnotology, you know, the study of ignorance, takes on.

And so, you know, this was something that, unbeknownst to me, when I was writing the first book *My Year of Meats*, and I was studying the kind of propaganda that Philip Morris and the other tobacco companies were, and the way that were suppressing, you know, information about, you know, the links between cigarette smoking and cancer, right—all of that was a perfect example of manufactured ignorance.

And so, this something else that kind of comes up in the book, I think is this idea that, yes, there are holes in the historical record, so look at the hole. Notice that it's there and look at the hole. So—And it ties into Alzheimer's in a funny kind of way. That's all I can say.

[ Pause ]

**Audience member:** One of the things that kept going through my mind as I read the book is whether in the back of your mind or maybe the front of your mind, you had some—metaphysical dimension of time. Like time was more than just the centrality of the present moment but if in some way maybe that

time—sequential time was a human invention like Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, or if time—everything happened at once. That's the best I can describe my metaphysical dilemma.

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** That's, that's a great question. I was—I think—you know, the answer is yes, I was very much exploring—I was exploring how time behaves, and was really trying to question this notion that time moves forward. Maybe time doesn't move—why is it that we have the sense that future is in front of us, you know, and the past is behind us?

There's actually—there's a tribe, I think in South America, that has flipped that and things—and when they talked about the future, they talk about—they point behind them, and when they talked about the past they point in front of them, all right. And the reason is because the past is something that you can see whereas the future is something that you can't see. And so, I thought—you know, I mean, when you think about it, these things are in a way constructed. There is—you know, they're cultural and social constructs. So, why not really take a look at that and turn it upside down and question it, you know, on a metaphysical level like that?

The other thing that—you know, in Japanese—in Zen, and this is, you know, true for the writings of Dogen, time doesn't flow in one direction, but time, you know, sort of moves in either direction. And so, as a result, the things that you do in the present can actually have a rectifying effect on past events, right. And I think this is a very encouraging way of thinking about—certainly, what I do as a writer, that perhaps—and what we do as historians and scholars—this idea that the work that we do can somehow rectify and cause time to flow backwards if you will. So why not entertain that as a possibility, you know?

So, yes, all of these things were things that I was playing with as I was writing the book.

**Audience member:** Thank you, thank you.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. And it was one of the things too I think I wanted to do, was to step out of the normal narrative linear narrative arc, you know, that most books follow, and to kind of break that and allow Ruth, the character Ruth, to actually create a kind of wrinkle in time, right, in this kind of slightly magical realist way. Because maybe it's not magical realism at all, maybe it's just real.

**Audience member:** So your answer is yes?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yes. The answer is yes. Thank you.

[ Applause & Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. Yeah, sure.

**Timothy Yu:** So I'm just going to—I just wanted to jump in with one of the questions that was posted to the Go Big Read website, because I must admit even though the question is quite general, I'm really curious is what you would say to us. So here's the question: how would you articulate the value of literature to those students involved in the disciplines of science, technology, engineering, or math?

**Ruth Ozeki:** I feel like I'm about to make a sales pitch here.

[ Laughter ]

It seems to me that we have all of these disciplines available to us. And each one is a different way of knowing the world. And I am a very, very strong supporter of interdisciplinary study of—you know, and this means that for creative writing students: in the room study physics. It goes both ways. And physicists, engineers, mathematicians: study literature, study history, study the humanities, otherwise, you just can't get a complete picture of the human mind. And the human mind is—you know, it is really truly one of the most amazing and interesting things that we have available to us to study. It's the way that we can know more about ourselves. And so I find it very distressing that, you know, because there is no money in literature, because there is no way of applied fiction in the way that there are applied sciences, right?

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** Well actually, that's not true. When you think about it, propaganda is applied fiction, isn't it?

[ Laughter & Applause ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** I take that back.

[ Applause ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** But, you know, that because—you know, because there is—and this is true, there is no money in writing fiction and there's no—there's no way of monetizing this that, that English departments, humanities departments, history departments, simply aren't getting the funding that science departments are. So I think this is a real shame, and I think that, you know, it's—that if any student certainly has the opportunity to take courses in a kind of multidisciplinary way, do it. This is your last chance. This is the chance that you have in university to really explore and investigate. And, you know, it's a wonderful option.

[ Applause ]

Thank you.

[ Applause ]

**Audience member:** I'm here as the spokesman for someone from our book club who couldn't be here. And our book club had a question we just couldn't answer. It has to do with the whole maybe in a historical record. We wondered about the bullied soldier, the friend of the Kamikaze pilot. What happened to him in your novel, does he come back? Does he survive?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Oh, yeah, yeah.

**Audience member:** What happened?

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** You know honestly, I don't think that's for me to say, because I can't really talk outside the scope of the novel, you know? Yeah, yeah. I mean, for me to arbitrarily bring him back to life now, is that real, is that true? No, I don't think so. I don't know, is the—

**Audience member:** Some of us thought we saw him coming back in part of the funeral scene in the temple.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Oh, I see, I see, I see. Well, if you noticed him, then yes, he's back.

[ Laughter & Applause ]

Thank you.

**Audience member:** Thank you.

[Pause]

**Audience member:** So, I noticed you have a lot of expertise with meditation and Zen Buddhism?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah.

**Audience member:** And, as a person who practices kendo, I was curious to hear what you think its significance in kendo is?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Audience member:** That's all.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. You know, I think that if you practice meditation, it will only help your kendo, really. No, I'm serious, I'm serious. It will. It will help you—I mean, there's, you know, the Japanese martial arts are very much—come out of a Zen tradition. And so all of the Japanese martial arts come—you know, there is a meditative component to all of them. And it will only help you be more aware and alert in the moment as you're practicing kendo too. It brings—it will bring your attention to your body in a way, and to your breathing, and to your movement in a way that you probably won't have if you don't practice meditation. That would be my guess. I don't practice kendo but I've done other martial arts. And I think that there is a synchronicity there between the two—these practices that are really beneficial.

**Audience member:** Thank you.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. But of course, if you would ask me, you know, about—instead of kendo, if you'd ask me about—well, just about anything like, you know, cooking omelets, I would've answered the exact same thing. So—

[ Laughter ]

**Audience member:** Hi. My name is Jessica Brand, and we read—

**Ruth Ozeki:** Hi Jessica.

**Audience member:** —*A Tale for the Time Being* in our English class, and we actually just began reading *My Year of Meats*.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Oh wow, cool.

**Audience member:** Yeah. And I noticed throughout *A Tale for the Time Being*, there seemed to be some tension between Ruth and Oliver. Actually I just learned that was your husband's real name. And so, some doubt or some miscommunications, Ruth seems to be unsure as to whether she's happy in a life of some isolation or if she prefers the city.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah.

**Audience member:** And in *My Year of Meats*, though I'm only about—we're only like collectively about 80 pages into the book so far—the romantic relationships are very strained to say the least. So, I just, I'm kind of wondering because your significant other is, you know, a very important part of your life. I'm wondering, what we should take away from these somewhat tenuous relationships?

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** You know, I almost feel like Oliver should be here to answer that question.

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** You know, I have to—this is where I kind of have to warn you that, you know, that the character in the book, the character of Ruth and the character of Oliver in the book, are characters, right. And one of the things that—one of the things that, as a novelist, I need to do, is to, you know, to reinforce and create sort of tension, to create conflict, all of these things in order to make a story. So, I'm tempted now to say the reality of it is that there's no tension in my relationship with Oliver at all! That's entirely fictional! It's not, it's not. But, there—you know, that it's—but you do reinforce those things when you're writing a fiction, right, obviously you have to. You know, in many ways, the Ruth character in the book is—well, okay, this is interesting.

In *My Year of Meats*, you know, the character, the character of Jane Takagi-Little, is kind of autobiographical character too, right. But I always thought of her as kind of being a superhuman version of myself, right? A kind of— you know, she's a wishful thinking version of myself, in a way. Whereas in *A Tale for the Time Being*, it's probably the opposite. You know, the Ruth character in *A Tale for the Time Being* is—and I think I can—I think this is fair to say—that she's much crankier than I am. You know, she's much more impatient. She's probably a little crazier. She's much more discontent. You know, she's much more frustrated. So, these are all sort of character traits that, believe me, I do have, but perhaps not to the extent that they appear in the book.

And this is true for all characters, okay, not just the ones that you name—you know, that you share and name or share a husband with. Sounds really kinky, right?

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** It's true for all fictional characters. I mean, we have to—as fiction writers, that's what we do. We—you know, even the worst villain you can imagine, you find something in yourself that you can look at, and give to that villain. And through that you're creating a human—you're creating a character who feels human, rather than just simply being a kind of a cardboard cut-out. So you have to find it in yourself in a way, and use that as a way to create the character. And that's, once again, true for all fictional characters. Fiction is a very mysterious process that way, but I think that all characters are, in some way, slightly autobiographical. This is one of those comments that you make and fiction writers around the world are saying "Shhh, don't tell them that" but I think it's true. I think it's true.

**Audience member:** Thank you.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah.

**Audience member:** So, we also read the book for our English class, and we're just wondering what inspired you to create the character of Jiko. She's definitely like one of my favorite characters in the

book. And, did you have like a special relationship with a grandparent or great grandparent that inspired you to create her personality and her persona?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Nice question, thank you. Yes, I did. I think—but not just one person, though. I think Jiko is kind of an amalgam of several very important people in my life, both people who I know and people who I don't know. Certainly, there's a lot of my mother in that old Jiko character. Now, my mother was not 104 years old, unfortunately, she didn't make it quite that far. But, you know certainly, a lot of Jiko's humor, I think, comes from my mother, who had a wonderful sense of humor as well.

Then there was this, a very wonderful Japanese nun, Buddhist nun named Setouchi Jakucho, OK, who is—she was a novelist too. And, she was—I mean, compared to Jiko, once again she's not 104 years old, she's young. She's only 90. But, she was—she is still a wonderful writer, and she's a very, very wise woman. She was a kind of—you know, she was a—she had a very racy past but she had—she used to write about and probably still does—she became famous for writing about sex from a woman's point of view. And this was simply not done in Japan. And so she was, early on in her career, she was labeled a pornographer. She had a lot of struggles early on.

When she was 50 years old, she decided that she was going to shave her head and become a nun. And she did that, and apparently at the time she said that she was willing to give up writing, but she kind of hoped that she wouldn't have to. And in fact, she's continued, and she's done some really amazing work. She was a—she translated the *The Tale of Genji*, for example, from ancient Japanese into modern Japanese.

So she was very much an inspiration I think for the Jiko character as well. Largely because she had a really great—once again, she had a really great—she has a really great sense of humor. And one of the things that she said, it was very funny, as a nun, right. As a Buddhist nun, she's actually—she's celibate, you know. And recently, I read an interview where she said that she was very happy that she had shaved her head and ordained and become a nun. But she felt that she'd gotten the timing a little bit wrong. Because if she had known that she was going to live to 90, she might have waited.

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** Thank you.

**Timothy Yu:** So, I think we have time for just one more question. But I did want to say that I believe Ruth has said she will sign some books at the end of the event. So I guess are we going to it right here?

**Ruth Ozeki:** I guess we're going to it right here, yeah.

**Timothy Yu:** So, she will be up here. So if you would like to get your book signed by her, please feel free to come up. So, let's take just one more question right here.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah.

**Audience member:** Thank you so much for taking this last question.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Sure.

**Audience member:** This goes off the last question over on this side. I was—you spoke of yourself and your husband in the novel as being fictional characters.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah.

**Audience member:** I wonder to what extent you apply that—technique, I suppose—to the rest of the community in British Columbia that you spoke about. I was just wondering your neighbors, your cats, all the other people that you spoke of on that side of Pacific, were they fictional or were they real? Were they some combination of the two?

**Ruth Ozeki:** I think there's a range, you know, there's a—there's certainly a—there's always a range. But I had certain kind of rules, you know, operating procedures. And one of them was that if I were going to—that anybody who was named by name, anybody whose real name I used, I would need to ask permission, and get their approval before I put them in the book. And so most of the characters on the island are fictional, but there are a couple of people in the book who are named, like the Friends of the Pleistocene, for example, that's a real group. The friends, John and Laura, who I was visited in the Driftless, they're real people. They're probably in the audience right now. And they did say, they did say it was all right. So those were the kind of parameters that I set up. I do have a cat, and his name is not Pesto. I changed his name. Nor is it Schrödinger.

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** I asked him if I could use his—I asked him if I could use his real name, and he looked at me and you know “the look,” right?

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** He looked at me and he turned his back and he raised his leg and he started licking his asshole.

[ Laughter ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** And I took that as a no.

[ Laughter ]

**Audience member:** Thank you.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Thank you. What a note to end on. Thank you.

[ Applause ]

**Ruth Ozeki:** Thank you all very much. Thank you.

[ Applause ]