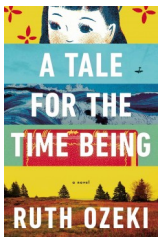


A Tale for the Time Being



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This cross-cultural gem of a novel tells the story of two women: one, Nao, a young Japanese schoolgirl; the other, Ruth, a middle-aged writer who lives in a rainforest town near Vancouver, Canada. Their lives intersect when Nao's *Hello Kitty* lunchbox lands as jetsam on the beach of the tiny town. Inside are letters, a WW II kamikaze wristwatch and most precious, Nao's diary, wrapped in layers and layers of plastic bags, so it is entirely legible.

The story is told in alternating voices. One belongs to the trendy, irrepressible, somewhat risqué and thoroughly jaded Nao who is bullied in school and mocked as an immigrant from America (she spent most of her childhood in California). The other belongs to Ruth who incidentally has the same first name as the author. Ruth has moved to Canada from another island town, New York City, because her husband loved the peacefulness of life in rural Canada and had major health issues. Also, Ruth brought her aged mother there to die.

Ruth is fascinated by the diary. Because she is suffering from writer's block on her new novel, she totally immerses herself in the diary and in trying to track down Nao. Did Nao's diary begin its journey in the destruction and flooding caused by the great Japanese tsunami of March 2011? Nao writes directly to the person that finds the diary, giving details of her life. Paradise for her had been her family life in California, but that was disrupted when her father lost his job and they had to return to Tokyo, nearly penniless. The incessant mocking and brutality of the other school children greeted Nao when she returned. Her fellow students even staged a mock funeral for her. All this Ruth reads thousands of miles away with horror. After delving into each interesting installment of Nao's diary she rations her reading each day she searches online for clues as to whether Nao is still alive.

One consolation for them both is the story of Nao's great grandmother, a Buddhist nun named Jiko who is at least 104 years old. In her diary Nao records spending a summer with her and learning to meditate and deal with stress in her life. Meanwhile back in North America, Ruth finally comes up with a hit. The Buddhist nun Jiko did exist. She wrote a book.

The novel is full of interesting facts and stories about both life in modern Japan and in rainforest Canada. It also covers Buddhism, science, physics, and life in a very small town. Unusual in a novel, many of the Japanese terms and words are footnoted. This gives added depth and texture to the novel.

Toward its end, the pace of the novel increases almost exponentially. You really care what happens to both Nao and Ruth. This is a novel that will stick with you for a long time. It will also make you dream of visiting Japan.

For another cross-cultural take about modern life in Japan, try Rebecca Otawa's [*At home in Japan: a Foreign Woman's Journey of Discovery*](#).

Posted by Dory L. on May 7, 2014

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