Suggested Discussion Questions for Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*

1. *A Tale for the Time Being*—with its emphasis on diary entries, letters, conversations, text messages and videos in Japanese, English and French—is essentially a book about global communication in its many forms. It is about what it really means to understand, or not understand, what another person is trying to express. How do different methods of communication connect characters in the book, and how do they act as a barrier? How do shifts in the form of communication and the language in which it is shared impact understanding?

2. Another theme in *A Tale for the Time Being* is the collaborative nature of reading. How did you respond to the book’s unusual opening and Nao’s focus on the circumstances of the reader? Ozeki quotes Proust on page 109: “In reality, every reader, while he is reading, is the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument, which he offers to the reader to discern what, without the book, he would perhaps have never seen in himself.” Do the different writers—Nao, Ruth and Ozeki, among others—have different views on the writer/reader relationship? What do writers and readers “owe” each other, and how must the two combine, in order to, in Nao’s phrase, “make magic”?

3. Although Nao’s feelings of isolation are central to the novel, the reader senses isolation in Ruth as well. Is there a way in which Nao and Ruth form two halves of the same character? Why do you think Ruth feels that Nao’s diary was written specifically for her?

4. Ruth struggles with leaving New York City for the island on the Pacific, but Nao is comforted when she leaves Tokyo for the countryside. How does the geography of place impact an individual’s experience? How does it impact the book’s theme of global connectedness?

5. More than once in *A Tale for the Time Being*, a character’s dream appears to exert physical influence on actual life (for example, Ruth dreams she meets Nao’s father on pages 350-353). Does this phenomenon weaken the novel by detracting from its realism, or does it strengthen the book by adding force to its spiritual or metaphysical dimension? Do the dreams impact decisions in the waking hours?
6. The presence of the jungle crow on the island is an unexpected surprise. Is this a symbol? If so, of what? What does the jungle crow represent to Ruth? To you?

7. The book touches on environmental issues: global warming, nuclear power, and garbage gyres in the Pacific Ocean. Given what you’ve read or heard about the March 2011 Japan tsunami, is it likely that the disaster was responsible for the diary washing ashore? The island residents discuss their concerns about the environment on pages 144-146. Do you share their fears?

8. Death is a prominent theme in the book. The classmates bullying Nao stage her mock funeral; Haruki #1 writes of his decision to be a pilot as a means of choosing his method of dying; Nao’s father attempts suicide; Jiko dies of old age. Since death is inevitable, what do you think Ozeki is saying about life by creating unique situations about death? (For example, see the letter written by Haruki #2 on suicide on pages 87-90.)

9. Did you know much about Zen Buddhism before reading this book? Haruki #1 reflects on the meaning of life as his death approaches, and cites a Zen master for the idea that “a single moment is all we need to establish our human will and attain truth” (page 324). Did the chapters on Jiko’s life at the temple provide a window into a new world for you as a reader? Are there parts of her Buddhist practice that you’d like to try in your own life?

10. Nao is sent to spend the summer with her great-grandmother in part to experience a break from her difficult daily life with bullying classmates and a suicidal father. While there she is witness to Jiko’s daily religious observances including prayers for mundane activities such as washing one’s feet or visiting the toilet. Is witnessing these practices helpful to Nao? How exactly does Jiko try to teach Nao to develop her “supapawa”? Are Jiko’s methods enough to help Nao cope with her life back in Tokyo? Do you wish Nao had received help of a different kind? Are there other things that realistically could have been done to help her?

11. Present throughout A Tale for the Time Being is a tension between modern and traditional practices. Jiko teaches Nao the art of Zazen, and Nao teaches Jiko how to text. The tension in this exchange mirrors Nao’s struggles. How does Nao overcome these struggles and move forward?

12. Several videos of Nao being bullied go viral. On page 107, Nao watches as the number of views of her mock funeral rises, and feels “almost proud”. Does the attention Nao receives from social media serve to validate her existence, or does it further her isolation and invisibility?
13. Responding to the ill treatment that Nao reports in her diary, Ruth’s husband Oliver observes, “We live in a bully culture” (page 121). Is he right? What responses to society’s bullying does A Tale for the Time Being suggest? Are they likely to be effective?

14. Ozeki quotes Dogen Zenji on page 259: “Every being that exists in the entire world is linked together as moments in time, and at the same time they exist as individual moments of time. Because all moments are the time being, they are your time being.” What does it mean to be a time-being? Do you think Nao, Ruth, and Oliver share the same understandings of what a time-being is?

15. Imagine that you had a notebook like Nao’s diary and you wanted to communicate with an unknown reader as she does. What would you write about? Would you be as honest as Nao is with us? What are the benefits and risks of writing such a document?

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