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## Together We'll Make Magic: Exploring the Relationship Between Empathy and Literature Using Ruth Ozeki's "A Tale for the Time Being"

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Together We'll Make Magic: Exploring the Relationship Between Empathy and Literature Using  
Ruth Ozeki's "A Tale for the Time Being"

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## **Dedication**

*This project dedicated to Jess Lambert, incredible sister and Bardian. Thank you for thinking of me when you saw the trees on Bard's campus, and for your tireless support of me during my time here. I don't know where I would be without your belief in me. I only know that I am where I belong because of you.*

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## Introduction

*The ability to try on another person's story, for a brief, fleeting moment, is what makes fiction matter.*

- Ruth Ozeki, as paraphrased by Caitlyn Dwyer

The topic of my Project came out of a minor existential crisis over whether the work I was doing as a Literature major “mattered.” I have never had an answer for the question “what kind of Literature is your specialty?” and I am incapable of choosing a favorite book or author. I rarely discuss the work I do outside of my classes, I have few close friends in the department, and throughout my 4 years at Bard, not one of the many books I have read has been purely for pleasure. I nevertheless consider choosing my major to be one of the best decisions of my life. The few times I have doubted my decision to moderate into Literature, including the time that lead to my topic, I have had my faith restored by two factors: The flexibility Literature affords its students, and my love affair with the process of close reading. My major afforded me the freedom to make my Project topic about anything that has been written about in a book. The endless ways of unpacking the language of a text ensure that when I sit down to write a paper, I always have something to say. In the moment I had to seriously consider my Project topic, however, the boundlessness of literature which had always been my source of motivation became a source of overwhelm. I could do almost anything, sure—but what would be the *point*?

Many of my friends are Human Rights majors or somehow affiliated with the department. Outside of the weirdly intimate and yet removed space of hyperfocus I enter when I sit down to analyze a text, I enjoy talking to people about people and “real-world” issues concerning them. I arrived at my topic by talking to one of my friends in Human Rights. I was telling him about the my trouble choosing a topic, expressing jealousy for his doing work that obviously “mattered,” when he asked me if I had heard of what the historian Lynn Hunt had to say about literature and

empathy. I had not, and the summary he gave me inspired me to find out for myself, which led to the investigation into the nature of empathy and its relationship to literature which became my Project topic.

The following passages of my introduction are dedicated to a review of the research on empathy which informed my investigation of its role in my chosen text, *A Tale for The Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki. It quickly became necessary early in my writing to look beyond the dictionary in pinning down an understanding of empathy, as it is a term which is frequently misunderstood. Moving forward from this research, the remainder of my project is dedicated to a close reading of Ozeki's novel based on this my understanding of empathy and situated in the context of other research on empathy as it relates to literature, henceforth referred to as "literary empathy." By the end of this project, I will demonstrate the ability of Literature to "matter" on two different levels. The first is using Ozeki's ideas on empathy developed throughout *A Tale*, and the second is the fact that I was able to use my close reading of a book to understand this everyday phenomenon. With both its content and its method, my project supports an argument for literary empathy as a tool for understanding processes of both writing and reading, as well as the worldview-expanding aims to which these processes are applied in our everyday life.

### **Other Voices on Literature and Empathy**

Hunt discusses the relationship between literature and empathy within the subsection "Novels and Empathy" (38-40) of her book *Inventing Human Rights*. While conceding the idea that "[e]mpathy develops only through social interaction," she makes the historically-based argument that novels helped 18th-century readers "expand... their purview of empathy" to include people from different social backgrounds. In order to display the relationship between

the rise of the novel and the development of modern ideas of human rights, Hunt focuses her analysis on popular 18th-century epistolary novels and their reception by the public. According to Hunt, the way such novels work to obscure their true authorship with the implied authorship of their characters “made possible a heightened sense of identification, as if the character were real.” This kind of suspense of disbelief is for Hunt unlike any other popular form of art at the time: “A play, in contrast, could not linger in this way on the unfolding of an inner self, which usually has to be inferred from action or speech” (45). Hunt combines this idea that novels produce a unique sense of personal identification with her knowledge of human rights history. Her ultimate argument, however, is for the impact of the novel on a cultural sense of empathy. She leaves the possibility of the novel’s impact on the individual’s empathic capacities to others.

Looking for a “point” to the study of literature frequently leads to drawing a connection between literature and empathy. Hunt may avoid claiming such a connection on the level of the individual person, but many others are not so careful. As Ann Jurecic notes in her article “Empathy and the Critic,” the difficult-to-support<sup>1</sup> claim “That *reading literature* makes us more empathic” has been invoked in defenses of reading by a wide variety of people, from talk show host Oprah Winfrey to philosopher Martha Nussbaum (13). Jurecic puts these claims in the context of an undergraduate Literature major where she asserts “[t]his consensus affirms the pedagogy of many teachers of college literature who assign works that broaden students’ understanding of human experience to encourage them to develop empathy for people very different from themselves” (10). Even the website description of Bard’s own Literature department echoes such assertions with the argument that “careful study of [language] can only

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<sup>1</sup> “I argue that educators need to release their hold on the supposition that reading enriches empathic concern because, in fact, there is little clear evidence that reading changes behavior beyond the private encounter with the book.” (Jurecic)

enrich our communication with each other: present, past, and future.” This claim does not use the term empathy, but what is “communication with those in the past” if not a form of empathy; of “being able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see the world through their eyes?” (15).

### **Defining Empathy**

The closest Hunt comes to an explicit definition of empathy is where she describes it as a process dependent on a kind of “psychological identification.” When relating the empathic reactions of her 18th-century readers, she relies on an intuitive understanding of the term to connect empathy with such phrases as “caught up in,” (42) “experience with,” (43) and “swept... out of themselves into a new set of experiences.” (45) These responses are undeniably empathic, but her descriptions fail to account for the prevailing ambiguity surrounding the term’s use. Hunt’s discussion of literature and empathy is subordinate to her book’s main purpose of discussing how these topics relate to the history of human rights. Much of the scholarship dedicated to empathy in its own right, however, will acknowledge to at least some degree that “There is no universally-accepted definition of empathy.” (Smadjor et. al, 381)

Even dictionary definitions acknowledge the ambiguity surrounding the term. The definition provided by the Oxford Online is apparently simple: “The ability to understand and share the thoughts and feelings of another” (“Empathy,” def. 1). Its section on usage, however, tells us that “People often confuse sympathy and empathy.” Julia Gittes discusses the historical context of this popular confusion in her Senior Project “Climb into His Skin and Walk Around in It: How Cognitive and Emotional Empathy Lead to Sympathy, Moral Reasoning, and Prosocial Behavior.” Citing Singer & Lamm’s “The social neuroscience of empathy,” Gittes tells us that the first use of the term “empathy” can be traced back to a translation of German philosopher

Robert Vischer by American psychologist Edward Bremner Titchener, and that Titchener coined the term to convey the sense of “feeling into<sup>2</sup>” captured by Vischer’s use of the German word *Einfühlung*. Gittes proceeds in her analysis by informing us of how this idea would come to be described by Theodor Lipps as the source of our ability to conceptualize that “we have selves and that others selves exist,” in a way which I interpret as being similar to Hunt’s application of the term to the history of human rights . Reading Lipps, Freud in turn connected *Einfühlung* with the process of “putting oneself, consciously or unconsciously, into someone else’s position in order to understand him.” (Sympathy reconfigured: Some reflections on sympathy, empathy and the discovery of values, Black 584) Gittes further quotes Black as saying:

*Einfühlung* and its related forms were used on quite a number of occasions by Freud—some 20 in all—not consistently translated by [British psychoanalyst James Strachey] in the *Standard Edition*<sup>3</sup>. (It seems likely that Strachey objected to the words empathy and empathise on aesthetic grounds.) One occasion when Freud used *Einfühlung* is in a famous passage in his paper ‘On beginning the treatment’: ‘It is certainly possible to forfeit this first success if from the start one takes up any standpoint other than that of *sympathetic understanding*, such as a moralising one’ (584)

Gittes uses Black’s arguments to attribute contemporary confusion of these two terms to Strachey’s “lack of differentiation... between empathy and sympathy.” (Gittes 6, citing Black 584). Avoiding conflation of the two is essential to my understanding of literary empathy in *A Tale for the Time Being*.

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<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Online describes the origins of the term “empathy” as “from Greek *empathēia* (from *em-* ‘in’ + *pathos* ‘feeling’) translating German *Einfühlung*.”

<sup>3</sup> Full title *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Strachey is considered best known for his work as its general editor. (Gay, 741.)

Oxford's distinction of the two terms in the "usage" section of its definition emphasizes the utility of talking in terms of literary empathy, as opposed to sympathy:

Empathy means 'the ability to understand and share the feelings of another' (*as in both authors have the skill to make you feel empathy with their heroines*), whereas sympathy means 'feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune' (*as in they had great sympathy for the flood victims*) ("Empathy") (italics mine)

It is telling that the example for empathy invokes literature, while the example for sympathy discusses a real-life tragedy. Empathy is presented by Oxford as something you sit with - literally, in a chair, with a book. You are feeling with the characters whose story you are reading, but there is no potential second step to this process, as in the case of the victims of a flood. In this way, Oxford's association of empathy with the world of fiction stands in direct contrast with its association of sympathy with real-world victims of a natural disaster. It is possible to act on the sympathy you feel for victims of a flood. There can be no donating to the cause of a suffering character you empathize with in a book. Furthermore, even if it turned out that the flood victims to which the dictionary refers in this example were themselves fictional, the contrast in tense still supports a reading of this definition as equating sympathy with real life and empathy with fiction. Feeling empathy for a character, regardless of a book's tense, is an experience felt in the moment. You feel emotions as the book does the work to evoke them in you, in that strange always-present literary spacetime which is the reason undergraduates are encouraged to describe the events of a novel in the present tense. Flood victims, on the other hand, have felt their misfortune in the past. Your sympathy is retrospective even if immediately felt, and the present represents the chance to ameliorate more than the chance to "understand and share".

To make sense of the differences between “understanding” someone else’s feelings and “sharing” them, it is useful to understand the popular distinction made by contemporary psychologists between two types of empathy: Cognitive empathy, and affective or emotional empathy. In her senior project “The Effect of Empathy on Implicit Bias,” Chelsea Beckford operates from the same basic definition of empathy as “understanding and sharing the feelings of another” that I do, getting it from K. Fuchsman’s “Empathy and humanity.” In her interpretation of A. Smith’s “Cognitive empathy and emotional empathy in human behavior and evolution,” Beckford asserts that “Cognitive empathy is mental perspective taking, while emotional empathy is sharing of emotion” (Beckford 11). Beckford does not connect these distinctions to her starting definition. However, my understanding of these two subsections of empathy leads me to equate cognitive “perspective-taking” empathy with the “understanding” portion of the basic definition, and affective “sharing” empathy with the dictionary’s sense of “sharing.” Gittes in her own project equates cognitive empathy with the psychological concept of Theory of Mind<sup>4</sup>, citing a variety of researchers to define it as:

...the ability to “identify what someone else is thinking” (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 16), represent the “mental state of another individual” (Blair, 2010, p. 8 98), comprehend “another’s emotional state or condition” (Eisenberg, 2000, p. 671), or to “understand and predict the behavior of others in terms of attributed mental states” (Smith, 2009, p. 490)

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<sup>4</sup> Where you find mention of the term Theory of Mind in contemporary discourse on Psychology, you will often find a discussion of Autism Spectrum Disorders. While Autism is understood by virtue of its status as a spectrum disorder to look very different across individuals, the idea that deficiencies in the ability to exercise theory of mind accounts for a general explanation of the social impairments observed in autistic individuals has been gaining traction since its introduction three decades ago. That a disorder which is not associated with amoral behavior can arise from impairments in processes necessary for empathy greatly complicates any connection between empathy and morality. For more on theory of mind and autism, see Helen Tager-Flusberg’s “Evaluating the Theory-of-Mind Hypothesis of Autism” published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

For Gittes, “emotional involvement” constitutes the line between cognitive empathy and what she terms emotional empathy. Understanding someone’s feelings without an emotional response can therefore be a form of empathy, but where an emotional response comes in, the empathy goes from being purely cognitive to a combination of cognitive and affective. The term “sharing” takes on a compelling involuntary dimension where she discusses Hatfield et al.’s conception of emotional empathy as a form of “emotion *contagion*” (Gittes 8) (*italics mine*) responsible for emotional mimicry observed as early as infancy. This implies that one can experience an involuntary empathic response without full cognitive understanding of what is being experienced. That these subcategories of empathy usually manifest in tandem, however, is supported by the dictionary’s defining empathy as both “understanding *and* sharing the feelings of another.” For my purposes, I use the research on cognitive empathy to expand empathy beyond the feelings of others to the thoughts, mental states, and experiences of others. I argue that what might be considered “inaccurate empathy,” or empathic response based on a misinterpretation of another person’s mental state, is not empathy at all but projection.

Nancy Snow echoes the distinction between the feeling *with* of empathy and feeling *for* of sympathy in her article “Empathy.” Asserting that “There is a difference between feeling an emotion for someone, and feeling an emotion with someone” Snow reaffirms my instinct that sympathy is an emotion more accurately applied to real-world persons than to fictional characters if we consider the difference between the work accomplished by a non-literary piece of writing and the unique capabilities of literature and its hallmark, poetics, to circumvent conscious reasoning. Snow uses a hypothetical example of a favorite co-worker getting a new job to demonstrate the difference between feeling happy with and happy for someone (66). In this example, the employee who is staying is happy because someone they like is happy to get

the new job. However, because this employee is also “chagrined at the prospect of losing such a fine colleague”, they are ultimately not feeling an empathic happiness, but sympathetic happiness. The feelings they have in light of their conscious understanding of the situation are happiness. But the feelings which were viscerally *evoked* in them are contradictory feelings of displeasure, and their centrality to the remaining co-worker’s experience precludes their ability to empathize. Their happiness can be sympathetic, but it is not truly empathetic so long as their primary feelings about the news are feelings of displeasure.

This example clarifies what I am not setting out to do. Namely, I am not asserting that it is impossible to have sympathetic emotions, or emotions *for*, characters in a work of literature. If we accept Snow’s argument that to feel a seemingly empathic emotion based on a mistaken belief about what another person is feeling is not actually empathy at all, but that it is still possible to use the term to describe the experience of feeling *with* the technically nonexistent emotions of fictional characters, then this would preclude an argument that a situation must necessarily exist in reality in order for us to have a sympathetic response. However, I argue that what Snow identifies as the necessary “bracket[ing] of... beliefs and feelings” (71) in the service of imagination is the primary work of literature and what importantly separates it from non-literary writing. Consider the example Snow uses to illustrate “how our empathy... is often mediated through language:”

Suppose that we get an e-mail message from an old friend describing the breakdown of his marriage. Suppose that the e-mail contains facts about his spouse’s infidelity, and describes his intense sadness and anger at having been deceived by someone he trusted and loved. Reading the email, we empathize with him, feeling sadness and anger ourselves at his spouse’s infidelity. The descriptive account by itself

does not generate empathy, though it certainly contributes. Reading the account triggers our empathy. (70)

Snow moves on from this passage to make the argument that one can explain the distinction between what feels *about* and what one feels *with* literary character through similar means. Therefore, the distinction between empathic reading and sympathetic reading is rooted in whether we feel *with* or *for* the characters. Literature is a unique medium for accessing questions of empathy, because as Hunt asserts in her arguments for interior access, its ability to produce a sense of identification *with* its characters results in a particularly mutual, or empathic, breed of affective response.

### **Text and Method**

I chose Ozeki's novel through which to conduct my investigation of empathy based on its unconventional structure and plot strongly concerned with human connection. *A Tale* effectively takes the form of two stories in one. Half of its chapters are all titled "Nao," and are dedicated to the diary entries of Nao Yasutani, a 16-year-old girl whose father's recent layoff has forced her and her family to move from their comfortable home in Sunnyvale, California to a cramped apartment in one of the poorer districts of Tokyo, Japan. In Nao's chapters, Ozeki's readers receive an intimate first-person account of what Ozeki implies is the hardest period of her young protagonist's life: We follow Nao as she recounts her experiences with savage bullying by her peers at school and a suicidal father at home, her only consolations being her diary and her relationship with her great-grandmother, a 104-year-old former anarchist turned Buddhist nun. The other half of *A Tale* follows the life of a woman with the same name, family, home, and profession as our real-life author, Ruth Ozeki. The chapters entitled "Ruth" begin with Ruth

discovering a Hello Kitty lunchbox in the sand of a beach near her home in Desolation Sound, Canada, shortly after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami struck northeastern Japan. This lunchbox contains a collection of old letters written in French and Japanese, and what looks like a copy of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. When the copy of Proust turns out to contain Nao's diary, with the letters being records of her great-uncle's experience as a kamikaze pilot in World War II, Ruth spends the remainder of her chapters occupied by her "passionate involvement in [Nao's] narrative" (Hunt, 39).

As Ozeki emphasizes with *A Tale's* chapter titles, this is a text with its characters at its heart. I therefore structure my project by considering Nao's and Ruth's chapters separately. I structure my chapters by considering, in turn, each of Ruth's and Nao's most important relationships to the characters around them. My first chapter focuses on Nao, and the role of empathy in her relationships with her abusive classmates, supportive grandmother, and suicidal father. I argue that tracing these relationships allow us to trace Nao's development as an empathic being, from self-centered teenager to an aware young woman. This allows me to connect growth in our ability to empathize to growth in our ability to understand the world at large. In my second chapter, I focus on Ruth's empathic reading of Nao's story, the intrusion of her Desolation Sound neighbors on her escapist immersion in Nao's problems, and the contrast in reading style provided by her reading the diary alongside her husband Oliver. I interpret these relationships as helping to identify the role of empathy in the reading process, compare empathic reading with other modes of reading, and observe the connection between empathic reading and the process of authorship. All together, these relationships allow me to develop the ways in which literary empathy helps us escape our day-to-day responsibilities even as it contributes to our ways of looking at ourselves and the world. Finally, each chapter also necessarily considers

the textually-mediated relationship these two characters share with each other. To the extent that attempting to “understand and share the thoughts and feelings of another” is the defining factor of this relationship between two people who never communicate with one another directly, this relationship provides a picture of empathy as place of common ground between readers and authors.

### **Chapter 1: Nao**

Nao’s relationship to her reader is the first relationship contributing to her empathic development which we get to see. The question of who “the reader” is in *A Tale* is an unusually complicated question, and Ozeki highlights this with the novel’s first line: “Hi!” With two letters and an exclamation point, Ozeki instantly raises a series of questions related to reading and writing. Most of these questions have to do with identity: Who is my narrator, who they are talking to, and are they really talking directly to me? First-person narration is not so unusual, and neither is writing fiction in the form of a diary. But when we keep reading to find that the identity of our narrator’s reader is as important to the narrator as it is to us, the text takes on an uncommon layer of complexity:

My name is Nao, and I am 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 am sitting in a French maid café in Akiba Electricity Town, listening to a sad chanson that is 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.

With these lines, Nao defines both herself and her addressee in terms of their relationship to her text. In this way, her casual voice establishes more than “its ‘confessional’ style, its ‘transparency’ of text, and the ‘sincerity’ and ‘authenticity’ of its authorial voice<sup>5</sup>.” Nao’s characterization is distinct from her first passages on. But by having Nao directly address her reader as well as the process of reading itself, her role as one party in a mutual relationship mediated by text is emphasized as much as her individual character right from the start. As the person “writing this and wondering about you,” Nao becomes an “author” in her own fictional right. As the person “reading this... maybe by now wondering about me, too,” (3) Ruth fills the role of reader in the same way, wondering about Nao along with us, Ozeki’s real-life audience. In this way, Ozeki renders the relationship these characters share as important as their individual characterization.

If the first section of *A Tale* begins by establishing the importance of this reader-author relationship, it ends by emphasizing the mutual act defining it. The obvious nature of this act is reading; its less obvious nature is a process rooted in a mutual attempt at empathy. Ozeki ends this introductory section with Nao telling her reader that if they choose to continue reading, “You’re my kind of time being and *together we’ll make magic!*” (4) (*italics mine*) She transitions

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<sup>5</sup> From a fictional article Ruth finds while searching online for information on Nao and her family. Titled “Japanese *Shishousetsu* and the Instability of the Female ‘I,’” the excerpt she is able to read discusses a genre of Japanese autobiographical confessional fiction called *Shishousetsu*, typically translated as “I-novel.” To the extent that this genre is defined by its “unmediated directness and veracity,” represents an attempt by the author to “record his or her personal experience,” and can be described as “unmediated and self-referential,” (Orbaugh 138) Ozeki’s mention of this genre appears an indirect reference to the voice she uses to write Nao’s chapters. I argue that the way Nao uses this voice to directly address her reader brings it beyond the characteristics mentioned in this fictional piece of criticism. For more on *Shishousetsu*, see Sharalyn Orbaugh’s “Naturalism and the Emergence of the *Shishousetsu*”

into the next section without clarifying what this magic is, leaving it up to the audience to interpret. We can do this using the lens of empathy by examining how Nao invites her reader to engage in a process of “mutual wondering.” The following set of lines both opens *A Tale* and brings it to a close: “You wonder about me./I wonder about you. Who are you and what are you doing?” Nao uses them here, but Ruth echoes them in the opening passage of the book’s epilogue. Both characters follow these lines with detailed speculation about the other. Nao wonders everything from whether her reader is “in a New York subway car hanging from a strap, or soaking in your hot tub in Sunnyvale” to whether they have a cat and if so, what the cat smells like. Ruth’s speculations about Nao are different because she has some information to work with, but Ozeki emphasizes their similarity by having Ruth repeat Nao’s lines. The two characters may be working from different directions, but their empathic goal of crossing boundaries to understand the experiences of the other is the same.

Understanding empathy in Nao’s chapters still requires examining her individual characterization, however. It would be an ironic failure of empathy on our part to forget that Nao’s main goal for writing is ameliorating the loneliness she feels as a teenage outcast. Appropriately, Nao’s distinctively teenage voice makes this impossible to forget. That *A Tale*’s opening line is “Hi!” and not a more sober greeting like “Hello,” starts the novel with a strong impression of our narrator’s youth. While Nao’s vividly detailed speculations about her reader come across sounding like something an imaginative literary author might write, Ozeki quickly disrupts this impression by having Nao follow up these evocative passages with “Ugh. That was dumb.” (4) Ozeki is quick to communicate the depths of Nao’s classic teenage self-consciousness: she has Nao introduce herself as a “stupid girl” before she even gives us her name, sure that her reader is “wondering what kind of stupid girl would write words like [the

opening section]” (4). This is the same passage in which she punctuates one of her sentences with a smiley face, and not for the last time. All of these features of Nao’s earliest passages remind us not to lose sight of Nao’s story as the main reason we are here. The self-conscious yet irreverent tone of Nao’s “Female ‘I’” keeps the text of *A Tale* grounded in the level of a specific human experience at the same time as she uses it to address broader questions about reading.

It does not take long reading Nao’s first chapter to find that her story is as much about loneliness and isolation as it is about communication and connection. The more Ozeki reveals about Nao’s situation, the more apparent it is that Nao seeks a connection to her reader because of her general lack of connection to the people in her daily life. Nao’s declared purpose for writing only provides hints of this underlying motivation:

So here I am, at Fifi’s Lonely Apron, staring at all these blank pages and asking myself why I’m bothering, when suddenly an amazing idea knocks me over. Ready? Here it is:

*I will write down everything I know about Jiko’s life in Marcel’s book, and when I’m done, I’ll just leave it somewhere, and you will find it!* (26)

How cool is that? It feels like I’m reaching forward through time to touch you, and now that you’ve found it, you’re reaching back to touch me!

In this passage, Nao buries her loneliness under her proclaimed goal to write down the life story of her great-grandmother; a goal she will not fulfill by the end of the book. But underneath this false promise, hints at what her diary will become are there. For one, there is the fact that “Fifi’s Lonely Apron”—the cafe where she goes to write because “[she] find[s] it relaxing”—was originally called “Fifi’s *Lovely* Apron.” Nao likes the place because it is on the decline, and in her words, “nobody’s trying too hard” (16). We will soon find out why Nao doesn’t like people

“trying too hard”: Nao was raised in America, and was recently forced to move to Japan after her father lost his prestigious job as a Silicon Valley software technician. The poor lifestyle this forces her family into is part of her struggles, but she struggles less with living in a “slummy ghetto neighborhood” (78) than with fitting into the rigid social conventions endemic to Japanese society. Over the course of the story, in places such as where Nao characterizes formal small talk as “polite Japanese-style conversation about nothing,” (137) she develops a picture of Japanese social convention which is largely centered around “trying too hard” in a way she finds “depressing.” In this way, the setting where Nao produces her chapters foreshadows the expository understatement which is the closest thing we get to an admission of loneliness: “The fact is, I don’t have much of a social network these days” (26). Refreshing for being so unfettered by Japanese social convention while remaining depressingly isolated from the world around her, Nao’s ease in the failing French cafe is an early hint at what she chooses to reveal rather than declare outright—that Nao is not only lonely, but that she is lonely as a result of her inability to be at home in her home country.

As we quickly find out, the exclusion at the heart of Nao’s relationship with her peers goes far beyond simply feeling out of place in a country which she has not called home since infancy. In a vivid exploration of what happens to someone treated in ways brutally devoid of empathy, much of the life Nao portrays for her reader consists of graphic displays of bullying—a word which, from Nao’s perspective as the subject of this abuse, “doesn’t begin to describe what the kids used to do to me.” The severity of this torture and the great extent to which it shapes the period of Nao’s life captured by her diary makes it one of the most important single components of Nao’s chapters. However, Ozeki does not write Nao as being particularly eager to explore

these experiences. Before any scenes of torture, the first reference to *ijime*<sup>6</sup> is made in only passing, sublimated to an explanation for why Nao found the “hacked” Proust journal appealing—this thematically suggestive feature of her diary is, in her eyes, primarily “an excellent security feature... in case one of my stupid classmates decided to casually pick up my diary and read it and post it to the internet or something” (21). Ozeki does not have Nao elaborate on this possibility, instead spending many more pages on background exposition before portraying Nao’s *ijime* in an actual scene.

Where Nao precedes her hesitant allusion to this abuse in the above passages with uncertainty that her reader will understand, this scene becomes an exercise in meeting the challenge of facilitating readerly empathy. Nao shows us this uncertainty in the following line: “I don’t know if you’ve ever had this problem of people beating you up and stealing things from you and using them against you, but if you have, you’ll understand that this book was total genius” (20). One of these techniques Nao uses to convey empathic understanding of her experience is the use of a sustained metaphor. Ozeki highlights the etymological origins of this term<sup>7</sup> by having Nao directly ask “have you ever seen those nature documentaries where they show a pack of wild hyenas moving in to kill a wildebeest or a baby gazelle?” Surely to have told us “it was like those nature documentaries where they show a pack of wild hyenas moving in to kill a wildebeest or a baby gazelle” would have been sufficient for establishing the sustained metaphor dominating this passage. Nao’s direct address of her reader once again

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<sup>6</sup> Bullying.

<sup>7</sup> From late 15c., from Middle French *metaphore*, and directly from Latin *metaphora*, from Greek *metaphora* ‘a transfer,’ especially of the sense of one word to a different word, literally ‘a carrying over,’ from *metapherein* ‘transfer, carry over; change, alter; to use a word in a strange sense,’ from *meta* ‘over, across’ + *pherein* ‘to carry, bear’ (Online Etymology Dictionary, “Metaphor”). Nao as written through Ozeki uses this familiar concept of a nature documentary to “carry over” the potentially unfamiliar concept of her abuse into understanding.

operates to emphasize *A Tale's* metafictional concerns by not only employing, but also highlighting, the ability of metaphor to use our past experience and preexisting understanding as a bridge to understanding something new.

If Ozeki's use of metaphor here helps us to understand Nao's *ijime* by highlighting its similarities to more familiar situations, Ozeki's use of irony takes the opposite approach, and highlights how it differs. The power of ironic contrast to provoke an empathetic response towards a character is first demonstrated in the section leading up to the bullying scene itself. Ozeki precedes this scene with a great deal of ominous buildup. Leading into it with a portrayal of Nao's daily goodbye ritual with her father, she lets us in on Nao's unspoken wish to "cling to [her] dad and beg him not to go" as "the hairs on [her] arms and the back of [her] neck start [...] to prickle, and [her] heart start[s...] beating real fast, and [her] armpits [become] like rivers flooding" in response to the sense of her tormentors watching them, waiting for her to be left unprotected. The gradual pace of this scene works to facilitate the empathy of the reader by helping us not only feel *for* Nao, but along *with* her as well. Ozeki takes this to another level, however, in the way she writes Nao's father's daily goodbye. Nao tells us that he does so "brightly," using the light and causal expression *ja ne*<sup>8</sup>. This normal and cheery image of a father wishing his daughter well is then followed by the following heartbreaking line, set aside from all other lines in this passage as the last one before the actual scene begins: "And I'd just nod because I knew that if I tried to speak I would start crying." This line derives its impact from its contrast to the normalcy her father is attempting to establish with his good-natured farewell. The same impact is achieved by Nao's sadistic classmates approaching her with apparently

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<sup>8</sup> Basically translates to "see you later." Ozeki does not provide a translation for this phrase. I knew the translation myself from having studied Elementary Japanese.

similar friendliness, “singing out greetings in terrible English” before “one hyena [...] lunges first, breaking flesh and drawing blood” and bringing the rest of “the pack” down upon her. That anyone witnessing the early stages of this abuse would have thought it “looked like good-natured fun, like [Nao] had lots of fun friends” (48) makes the harsh reality of their abuse when it sets in even harsher, and therefore more “emotionally contagious<sup>9</sup>.”

In the passages following this scene devoted to Nao’s father’s lie that “he’d been hired at this new start-up that was developing a line of empathic productivity software,” (49) Ozeki further develops this function of irony while connecting Nao’s abuse to a lack of empathy on the part of her classmates. We will eventually find out that the specific details of this lie foreshadow the ethical dilemma related to empathy which cost Nao’s father his job and led the Yasutanis to this “life right after Sunnyvale” in the first place. In the meantime, however, all we know is that this cruel period of Nao being “covered with fresh cuts and pinching bruises” and her mother being out the house to “spend all day at the invertebrate tank in the city aquarium,” “seemed to go on forever... *And then one evening*” (italics mine) a new, happier, albeit temporary period of confidence and relief began with her father’s lie about empathy productivity software. The main purpose of the passages devoted to this untruth are undeniably to stress the desperate straits Nao’s family is in, and Ozeki repeatedly employs this contrast in the bullying scenes. Here as there, seeing the pleasant reality that could be emphasizes the harshness of the unpleasant reality that is. At the same time, where she explicitly reminds us that Nao endures a complete lack of empathy from those around her, she helps us understand empathy as an important component of kindness and its absence as a precursor for cruelty:

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<sup>9</sup> See page 7 for my first mention of emotional contagion and its role in affective empathy.

During the commercial breaks, [Nao's father] told us stories about the line of productivity software he was developing, and how computers were going to experience empathy and anticipate our needs and feelings even better than other human beings, and how soon human beings wouldn't need each other in the same way any more. *Given what was going on at school, I thought this all sounded very promising.* (Italics mine)

Here, having been failed in this department by the human beings in her life, Nao is obviously happy at the idea of not needing human beings to experience connection. At the same time as this obvious meaning is conveyed, it is suggested that this failure by Nao's peers to provide Nao with healthy connection is at least partly a failure to "anticipate the needs and feelings" of others.

Therefore, at this point, Ozeki appears to present us with a view on empathy that is rather simple. Nao receives no empathy from her peers, and is therefore driven to seek it through writing to an unknowable "reader," always meditating on the character and meaning of what appears to be a surrogate form of human connection. This reading of Ozeki's text presents as an argument for equating empathy with moral behavior—if the presence of empathy translates to kindness, then its absence translates to cruelty. However, this intuitive view on the role of empathy in human relationships gets complicated when Ozeki makes the fittingly empathetic move of writing a scene from the bully's point of view; not by shifting perspectives to one of Nao's tormentors, but with a scene where Nao herself becomes the tormentor by exploiting her weaker peer "Daisuke-kun<sup>10</sup>" for information on her classmates' next plot against her. The text conveys the idea that cruelty is motivated by having been the subject of cruelty yourself where Ozeki writes Nao as telling her reader that "it felt great" to have power over Daisuke, "as easy as

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<sup>10</sup> In another example of cruel irony, the honorific suffix *-kun* typically functions as a term of endearment, particularly when attached to a first name (like "Daisuke") rather than a surname.

plucking a sock off a line of laundry... Powerful. Exactly the way I'd hoped I would feel when I fantasized about getting revenge," and enjoying the sensation of sounding like a *sukeban* (female gang leader) while barking orders to her captive (102).

Ozeki nevertheless remains careful to keep the boundaries between Nao and her tormentors distinct. We are never given cause to assume that Nao's bullies have justified reasons for abusing her, and are in fact discouraged from such assumptions where Daisuke tells Nao that an unnamed "they" has already robbed him of all his money, causing Nao to reflect "Of course they did. The powerful kids, led by a real *sukeban* named Reiko, ran a whole operation fleecing pathetic kids like me and Daisuke." This reality check undoes any fantasy Nao has of belonging to the same class as her tormentors. The root of their cruelty lies in a power dynamic "pathetic kids" like her and Daisuke-kun have no hope of challenging. This impression of connection between Nao and Daisuke on one side of a kind of class boundary, with "the powerful kids" on the other side, is enforced even within Nao's description of what it felt like to have power over someone else for a change:

Standing there, we were frozen in time, me and Daisuke-kun, and the future was mine. No matter what I chose to do, for this one moment I owned Daisuke and his future. It was a strange feeling, creepy and a little too intimate, because if I killed him now we would be joined for life, forever, and so I released him. (105)

Here an impression of connection between Nao and Daisuke-kun is taken to a strange and subversive place. If Nao's becoming an abuser is a subversion of our preexisting conception of her as a victim, then this scene subverts the entire abuser-victim relationship. Far from putting distance between Daisuke-kun and herself, Nao finds that the experience of cruelty is "a little too intimate." Threatening Daisuke's life is a highly connective experience for Nao, freezing the two

of them in time together, and she is overtaken by the impression that actually killing him would mean joining them completely, forever. Reading this passage makes it impossible to associate the fundamentally *connective* experience of “feeling another person’s thoughts and feelings as if they were your own” with altruism and its absence with cruelty - this passage treats cruelty and connection to another person’s thoughts and feelings as one and the same.

Nao’s parents take this problematization of empathy further by proving that one can be loving and still lack empathy. Nao’s mother and father are simply too busy dealing with their newfound poverty to know much of what has been happening to their daughter at school, and too busy discouraging open discussion of their problems to help her deal with them. When Nao’s mother finds the scars that bullies have been leaving on her daughter’s body, her well-meaning reaction only proves how little she understands her daughter's experience. It functions as an example of what happens when someone is moved to compassionate action without taking the time to properly empathize:

I already thought my father was insane, because this was at a time when I still believed that only insane people try to kill themselves, but at the back of my mind, I guess I was hoping that my mom was normal and okay again, now that she had stopped watching jellyfish and had found a job. But at that moment I knew she was as crazy and unreliable as my father, and her question<sup>11</sup> only proved it, which meant there was nobody left in my life I could count on to keep me safe. I don’t think I’ve ever felt as naked or alone.... I gathered up my clothes from the tatami and put them on, turning away from my mom so I wouldn’t have to watch her face as she stared at my body.

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<sup>11</sup> Whether Nao had joined any clubs. As Nao puts it, “She had just examined me all over and seen what my classmates were doing to me, and now she was suggesting that I spend even more time with them after school?... She’s going to get me killed.”

“I’ll be okay, Mom. I’m not really so interested in after-school activities.”

*But she wasn’t hearing me.*

“No,” she said. “You know, I think I will have a talk with your homeroom teacher . . .”

The fish<sup>12</sup> shuddered in the curve of my rib cage. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Mom.”

“But Nao-chan, this has got to stop.”

“It will stop. Really, Mom. Just leave it alone.”

But Mom shook her head. “No,” she said. “I can’t stand by and let this happen to my daughter.” There was something new in her voice, an edge of can-do attitude and haircut, and it really scared me.

“Mom, please . . .”

“Shimpai shinakute ii no yo,” she said, giving my shoulders a little hug.

Don’t worry? How stupid is that! (74-75) (*italics mine*)

In this scene, the last way Nao’s mother wants to make her daughter feel is “naked and alone.” She has this effect because of her inability to *hear* Nao, and see beyond her own feelings of protectiveness and newly found resolve. The phrase “I can’t stand by and let this happen to my daughter” implies that her reaction is more rooted in her pride as a mother than it is the desire to understand Nao’s experience. It is this failure to decentralize herself by “bracket[ing] [her] beliefs and feelings<sup>13</sup>” that results in her failure to empathize, and it is her failure to empathize

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<sup>12</sup> Her mother’s reaction makes Nao feel “like a big cold fish was dying just below my heart”

<sup>13</sup> “When I empathize, I bracket my beliefs and feelings, and imagine being you, with your beliefs and feelings” (Snow interpreting the research of Alvin I. Goldman and Robert M. Gordon) (71)

which causes Nao to feel so much worse than when she carried the burden of her *ijime* by herself.

It takes many chapters for an adult figure to show up who can help Nao feel understood, but when she does, she plays a pivotal role in Nao's empathic development. This figure turns out to be her 104-year-old Buddhist nun great-grandmother, the telling of whose life story Nao declared was her purpose for writing, only to find herself caught up with telling her own. The summer Nao spends with Jiko represents one of the only sections of Nao's chapters where empathizing with Nao is not primarily a painful or uncomfortable experience. In contrast to Nao's father, who pretends to have found a job in order to avoid facing the unpleasant reality of what is going on in their lives; and Nao's mother, who perpetuates the lie that her husband's repeated suicide attempts are no more than repeated acts of absent-mindedness, the ability to "pull a story out of anybody" is "another one of old Jiko's superpowers" (244) in addition to her ability to "make you feel okay about yourself... just by being in the same room as you" (165). Neither of these superpowers require Jiko to give Nao advice or take steps to change Nao's situation. Both require nothing being empathizing with her experience, making Nao feel understood.

We see Jiko's superpowers in action and their value to Nao when she finds Nao's scars. Like Nao's mother, she discovers them while bathing with Nao. Unlike Nao's mother, her only response is the height of empathy: Rather than offer her advice, assuming she understands Nao's situation, she does the opposite by asking Nao a question: "Are you very angry?"(168) Nao's response is not positive at first. She feels immensely sad and runs away, and Jiko allows her to have this reaction without any further comment. We see this seemingly negative reaction for the

catharsis it is in the following scene, where Nao goes and confronts Jiko in her study without any prompting:

“Yes,” I told her. “I’m angry, so what?”

She didn’t turn around but I could tell she was listening so I went on, giving her an executive summary of my crappy life.

“So what am I supposed to do? It’s not like I can fix my dad’s psychological problems, or the dot-com bubble, or the lousy Japanese economy, or my so-called best friend in America’s betrayal of me, or getting bullied in school, or terrorism, or war, or global warming, or species extinctions, right?”

“*So desu ne*<sup>14</sup>,” she said, nodding, but keeping her back to me. “It’s true. You can’t do anything about those things.”

“So of course I feel angry,” I said, angrily. “What do you expect? It was a stupid thing to ask.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “It was a stupid thing to ask. I see that you’re angry. I don’t need to ask such a stupid thing to understand that.”

“So why did you ask?”

Slowly she turned herself around, pivoting on her knees, until finally she was facing me. “I asked for you,” she said.

“For me?”

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<sup>14</sup> Ozeki translates this stock phrase as “Hmm, yes, I suppose that’s so . . .” (17) in a footnote of her own (footnote number 19). It is worth noting that many of these footnotes contain commentary which could only have come from Ruth. An example of this is footnote number 17, which reads “Can’t find references to medical cafes or Bedtown. Is she making this up?” This implies that *A Tale*’s footnotes are meant to be read as annotations Ruth makes in Nao’s diary. Translations are therefore still ultimately Ozeki’s, given she is the text’s real author. Because they are provided through Ruth, however, it is always possible that Ozeki would translate slightly differently were she “working on her own”.

“So you could hear the answer.”

...After that, I started telling her little things about what was going on in school and stuff, even when she didn't ask. And as I talked, she just listened and made her juzu beads go round and round the string, and I knew that every bead she moved was a prayer for me. It wasn't much, but at least it was something.

The main difference in Jiko's approach as compared to Nao's mother's approach is that Jiko makes the interaction entirely about Nao. Her own feelings do not factor into her reaction at all - everything she says, she says “for [Nao].” In doing so, she does not solve Nao's undeniably serious problems. But in “hear[ing] the answer,” Nao is better able to understand her own feelings, which makes her better able to confront them. Where Nao's mother's reaction only intensified the feelings of isolation her *ijime* caused, Jiko's nonjudgmental support has the opposite effect. After so much time being misunderstood by those around her, Jiko's empathetic ability to put her own self aside and validate Nao's experience is what Nao needed in order to feel safe and supported.

Jiko does not stop at supporting Nao, but teaches her how to cultivate her own empathic superpowers. During her time housing Nao in her remote mountain temple, Jiko teaches her great-granddaughter to practice consideration for even inanimate objects, requiring her assistance in such rituals as throwing away needles only after “chanting and then sticking them into a block of tofu so that they will have a nice soft place to rest,” (205) and even saying prayers of gratitude for their toilet after using it (167). In Jiko's temple, every act spent taking care of oneself is supplemented by thoughts for the needs of others; even washing one's feet is an occasion for a ritual prayer that “*all sentient beings/Attain the power of supernatural feet*” with no hindrance to *their practice.*” (177) Upon being confronted with a gang of delinquent girls of the same kind to

which Nao compares her biggest bully, Reiko, outside of a convenience store, Jiko acts in accordance with her principles of universal consideration and respect by bowing deeply to them, despite Nao's insistence that they go before they are assaulted. In doing so, she puts her daily self-decentralizing temple practices into action, showing Nao that her own fear of such girls is less important than their right to respect.

When Jiko and Nao leave the girls in front of the convenience store to go and sit by the beach, however, we get to see Jiko teach Nao a lesson in words, rather than deeds. Where previous lessons have been primarily about respect for other beings, this lesson uses metaphor to show the importance of empathic boundary-crossing. In another display of the utility of metaphor in conveying unfamiliar or difficult concepts, Jiko takes the image of surfers falling off their boards and turns it into "a typical Jiko comment, all about pointing to what she calls the not-two nature of existence":

"There," I said. "See that one? He's just standing up... he's up... he's up... oh, he's down." I laughed. It was funny to watch.

Jiko nodded, like she was agreeing with me. "Up, down, same thing," she said...

So I said, "No, it's not the same thing. Not for a surfer."

"Yes," she said. "You are right. Not same." She adjusted her glasses. Not different, either."

See what I mean?

"It *is* different, Granny. The whole point of surfing is to stand on top of the wave, not underneath it."

"Surfer, wave, same thing."

I don't know why I bother. "That's just stupid," I said. "A surfer's a person. A wave is a wave. How can they be the same?"

Jiko looked out across the ocean to where the water met the sky. "A wave is born from deep conditions of the ocean," she said. A person is born from deep conditions of the world. A person pokes up from the world and rolls along like a wave, until it is time to sink down again. Up, down. Person, wave." (194)

This section points to one of Jiko's biggest roles in the novel. At the same time as she teaches her great-granddaughter about interpersonal empathy, her lesson is broad enough to be applied to all kinds of empathy, including literary. If empathy is feeling and understanding another's thoughts as if they were your own, then empathy can be understood as rooted in the work of transcending or otherwise subverting interpersonal boundaries - just what Jiko does by equating surfer with wave. Applying this theme of subverting boundaries to the boundaries which exist between readers, authors, and fictional characters makes Jiko an important device for developing *A Tale's* ideas on literary empathy.

The importance of this passage to the book's overall themes is underscored by the fact that this is not the first time we see Jiko say something like this to Nao. In fact, she presents Nao with the exact same paradox the first time she "appears" in the novel, as a figure in a dream of Ruth's, corresponding with Nao via computer:

*Up down, same thing. And also different, too...  
When up looks up, up is down.  
When down looks down, down is up.  
Now do you see?*

Taking these two instances into consideration alongside one another, we also get a clarification of the surfer scene. The dream scene does something which the surfer scene does not; namely, it

acknowledges the role of personal perspective. The surfer scene can be read as a take on an example of projecting, as opposed to empathy. Where we disregard the limitations of our own personal experience and our position relative to the experiences of others, we open ourselves to drawing false equivalencies, therefore participating in a process of projecting more than a process of empathizing. This is what Nao's mother does when she tells Nao "I know how difficult all this has been for you" (262). Through acknowledging that while a wave is not different from a surfer, it is also not the same, Jiko manages to avoid this trap of false equivalency. When she acknowledges the relative positions from which we empathize - whether we are "looking up or down" - she shows us how our own identities change the way we relate to others.

We see Nao apply her developing empathic superpowers for the first time when she reads the diary of her great-grand-uncle Haruki. After seeing so much of Nao's chapters dedicated to her own difficulties with severe bullying at school and a suicidal parent at home, the following lines represent a turning point in Nao's growth as a character and as an empathic human being:

If you take all of the feelings I felt when we were packing up to leave Sunnyvale, and when Mom found my scars in the sento, and Dad fell onto the train tracks, and my classmates tortured me to death, and you multiply those feelings by a hundred thousand million, maybe that's a little of how my great-uncle Haruki felt when he was drafted to be a kamikaze pilot. (179-180)

Nao's thinking process in this passage is another example of the dialectical relationship between empathy and metaphor. Much as Ozeki has her encourage us to apply the familiar knowledge of nature documentaries to the potentially unfamiliar experience of bullying, and as Jiko uses the mundane example of surfers to convey the Buddhist principle of nonduality, Nao here uses her

own experience as a lens through which to makes sense of what her great-grandfather went through. The crucial element of this process, however - the element which makes it both a truly impressive example of empathy and a true turning point for Nao - is Nao's acknowledgment of the limits to this understanding. Not only does the knowledge of her great-uncle's experience teach Nao that her immense suffering can still be small compared to someone else's - how even her "down" is "up" when she gets the opportunity to "look down" - it also conveys an awareness of the limits of her ability to relate to her great-grand-uncle.

Nao shows her progress in learning to decentralize herself in her understanding of others when she refrains from claims such as "What Haruki No. 1 went through must have been more than a hundred thousand times worse than what I went through." To have done so would have been a failure of Jiko's teaching practices and a failure of empathy. That she instead says "*maybe* that's a little of how my great-uncle Haruki felt" demonstrates her increased awareness of the limits which draw the line between empathy and projecting. When Nao reflects, shortly after her exposure to this knowledge of her ancestor, "I thought I knew all about ijime, but it turned out I didn't know anything about it at all" (244) and, in her final chapter of the novel, "I thought I understood everything about cruelty, but it turns out, I didn't understand anything at all" (385) she shows that the enduring lesson taught to her through this personal narrative of Haruki's was not a new understanding of some truth outside of her personal experience, as much as it was a new awareness of the limits of her own understanding.

We see the culmination of Nao's relationship to her classmates in what turns out to be her final day of school. At this point in the novel, Nao's two biggest sources of hardship have each peaked. Where she thinks to herself "Two nasty Toilet Incidents in one week. Weird," (283) she is reflecting with characteristic glibness on how in only seven days, she has been sexually

assaulted by her peers in a school bathroom, and come home to find her father nearly dead of a suicide attempt (for the second time) in her own bathroom at home. Faced with her parents once again trying to pass off her father's suicidality as an accident (285) while her classmates auction off her underwear online, Nao's response to these pressures is to buzz her hair as bald as her great-grandmother Buddhist nun. That Nao follows this pious act with sitting zazen under her covers all night and patronizing her local shrine in the morning (287) makes the following scene - taking place after Nao has climbed onto her desk in homeroom and thrown back the hood of her jacket - all the more unexpected:

A gasp went around the room that sent shivers up my spine. The *supapawa* of my bald and shining head radiated through the classroom and out into the world, a bright bulb, a beacon, beaming light into every crack of darkness on the earth and blinding all my enemies. I put my fists on my hips and watched them tremble, holding up their arms to shield their eyes from my unbearable brightness. I opened my mouth and a piercing cry broke from my throat like an eagle, shaking the earth and penetrating into every corner of the universe. I watched my classmates press their hands over their ears, and saw the blood run through their fingers as their eardrums shattered. (288)

This scene is baffling. It is also one of several moments throughout the novel<sup>15</sup> blending realism and fantasy. Given that similarly fantastic occurrences play a central role in the plot of later chapters narrated by the adult Ruth, it is difficult to say this scene occurred entirely in Nao's bald teenage head. What we can be sure of is that Nao's final interaction with her classmates gives her no insight into their thoughts and feelings, She does tell us that she only climbed down from her

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<sup>15</sup> Page numbers for where else I discuss this

desk because she “felt sorry for them,” and she leaves the classroom for the final time only after delivering deep Buddhist bows to both her teacher and her peers (288). But while this demonstrates her ability to put respect for them as fellow beings above her own feelings of enmity, it is closer to sympathy than empathy.

This capstone of Nao’s relationship to her peers therefore ends on a fittingly absurd and unexpected note that argues against the feasibility of truly universal empathy. The boundary dividing Nao and Daisuke-kun from the “powerful kids” is one boundary Ozeki never subverts. One way of reading this is that it demonstrates the limitations of Nao’s empathic superpowers. As one of the “weak kids,” Nao and her tormentors could be too fundamentally different for Nao to have any insight into their experience<sup>16</sup>. As Jiko would put it, to them they are “up” because Nao is “down.” It could also be read as moralizing on Ozeki’s part. Perhaps she is sending the message that those who would dehumanize others as brutally as Nao’s peers have dehumanized her deserve no humanizing treatment themselves.<sup>17</sup> However we choose to interpret it, a few things remain unambiguous. First, that the boundary between Nao and her tormentors was erected out of their cruelty towards her. Second, that what matters for Nao’s character development, and the development of her capacity for empathy, is not that she learn to have empathy for the people who have shown her none. Any expectation that this be the case is hilariously frustrated by her weaponization of a monk’s hairstyle.

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<sup>16</sup> “If we were not sufficiently similar to those with whom we empathize, imaginatively projecting ourselves into their circumstances would not be a reliable guide to how they feel, nor would attempts to simulate their thoughts and feelings be empathically accurate” (Snow, 71)

<sup>17</sup> This could vary with a reader’s individual experiences. A reader who has been bullied themselves may be more likely to interpret this scene as an unsympathetic condemnation of bullying. Our ability to empathize with others depends heavily from our “starting position,” as Jiko describes with her “up is down, down is up” riddle.

The main person with whom Nao learns to empathize is not her bullies, but her father. She does so in a breakthrough moment which is one of the most climactic moments of the book; a moment which shows how empathy for others can change not only how we see the subject of our empathy, but the way we make sense of the world. For most of the novel, Nao's relationship with her father has similarities with what might be considered a typical teenager's relationship to her parent. Even while acknowledging that "my dad loved me and wanted me to be safe" (79) Nao frequently takes an attitude with him. In one scene, Nao "grumpily" says to her father "You're so noisy! You want me to get you some cigarettes?" (101) and in another, rips up the kindly-worded letter he left her after dropping her off at Jiko's temple, telling us "I thought it sucked that he'd just ditched me there and split before I'd even gotten a chance to beg him to stay and make him feel guilty" (167). Of course, writing off Nao's lack of empathy for her father as typical teenage resentment means, in this context, writing off vital extenuating circumstances: namely, her father's suicidal depression. Smoking cigarettes is one of only a few activities in which Nao's father engages throughout the day; it is implied that it is one of his only pleasures. He leaves Nao with Jiko not because he is trying to get rid of her, but because he has plans to spend the summer getting therapy. In short, he does not deserve Nao's harsh treatment of him. What's more, we have proof that she knows this.

It will eventually take supernatural intervention on Ruth's part to change this unempathetic behavior towards her father. But despite what this behavior might look like without context, Nao not only loves her father, she also understands him and his situation. The following passage describes Nao's reaction to hearing her father return from one of his many late-night walks through the streets of Tokyo. It movingly exemplifies both Nao's love for her father, as

well as her understanding for what he goes through in the wake of his fall from grace as a successful Silicon Valley programmer:

His jacket was hanging on a hook in the hallway so I slipped it on over my shoulders. It was a jacket he's gotten from his company in Sunnyvale, a cool, high-quality jacket like they give you on film shoots, made of Gore-Tex with the IT company logo on the back and he used to wear it with a hoodie underneath, in the days when he was cool and high-quality too, before the polyester suits. The smooth, silky lining was still warm from his body, but against my bare skin it made me shiver even more. I hugged it around me until I felt warm again.

This scene, in which Nao has legitimate cause to fear for her father killing himself - makes it clear that Nao's shivering is more fear than it is cold. She hugs his jacket to reassure herself that he is safe, not out of an attempt to warm up. Referring to past days when your father "used to be high-quality" (262) is undeniably harsh, but it also shows Nao understands the source of her father's shame as much as she can at this point in the novel, before he confesses to her the full reasons for his dismissal. And yet, despite her love and understanding - or perhaps because of it - after his second suicide attempt, she hands him a note reading: "*Your great grand-uncle Haruki would not keep screwing up like this... If you're going to do something, please do it properly.*" (289)

"Empathy" is defined as understanding and sharing the feelings of another person. Nao understands her father's situation and shares his feelings of shame. She does not actually want to see him dead, and yet, she meets his moments of greatest vulnerability with some of her moments of greatest callousness. Intuitively, we understand that callousness is unempathetic; critically, however, understanding Nao's relationship with her father helps us define the "with"

in the dictionary definition of empathy. Any daughter would feel angry at something which threatened her father's life. In Nao's case, this something was her father, and the atypicality of this threat does nothing to change her typical reaction. Having empathy for her father, and not merely justified fear for his life and anger towards that which threatens it, would require the same decentralization of self, of boundary-crossing that occurs when we sit down and lose ourselves in a compelling story.

It is therefore fitting that when Nao is finally able to achieve an empathic relationship with her father, it is because someone else has sat down and lost themselves in her story. Ozeki takes the idea of "losing yourself" in a book to its farthest extent in *A Tale's* most fantastical section: The dream sequence where Ruth crosses the boundary between the worlds of readers, authors, and texts in order to prevent Nao's father's final suicide attempt and deliver Haruki No. 1's secret French diary. The opening passage to this scene links Ruth's supernatural feat to literary boundary-crossing in ways which are simultaneously poetic and explicit:

What does separation look like? A wall? A wave? A body of water? A ripple of light or a shimmer of subatomic particles, parting? What does it feel like to push through? Her fingers press against the rag surface of her dream, recognize the tenacity of filaments and know that it is paper about to tear, but for the fibrous memory that still lingers there, supple, vascular, and standing tall. The tree was past and the paper is present, and yet paper still remembers holding itself upright and altogether. Like a dream, it remembers its sap.

But she holds her edge, pushing until the fibers give way, like cambium to an ax blade, like skin to a knife—

The boughs part then, revealing a path that winds and twists, growing narrower and narrower, leading her into an ever-thickening forest. (346)

It is only because of Ruth's ability to "push through" the boundary between her reality and the reality of Nao's diary that Nao is able to push through the boundary of misunderstanding and non-communication separating her from her father. At the point in the story where Ruth supernaturally enters Nao's world, Nao has read a version of her great-grand-uncle's diary which he has censored so that he would not be branded a traitor after his death. The censored version tells Nao her pacifistic ancestor carries out his mission with stoic determination. Meanwhile the uncensored version, written in French so as to be undecipherable to his military superiors, tell a very different story. Thanks to Ruth's magically transporting the letters to where Nao can find them, Nao is able to translate this diary with the help of her father, and they discover that their ancestor

...didn't want to support a war that he hated, and he didn't want to cause any more suffering, even for his so-called enemy. When I read this, I felt a little bit ashamed, actually. I remembered how I used to ambush Daisuke-kun and beat him up, and also how I went forth as a living ghost to stab my enemy Reiko in the eye. I started to feel so bad about this, I decided I would apologize if I ever saw them again, which I probably won't. (386)

Haruki No. 1's compassion for foreign enemies he has never met inspires Nao, for the first time, to feel similarly for her enemy classmates for the first time. This is not the same as feeling empathy for them; it does not involve any insight into the experiences of these enemies. The same cannot be said of the change Haruki's diary produces in Nao's relationship with her father. When reading the passages of his treasonous decision inspires "an explosion of sadness" (386) in

her father, these passages provide Nao with the key she needed in order to perform the decentralization of self necessary for empathizing with him.

Appropriately enough, empathizing with her father ends up requiring of Nao that she understand his struggles with the concept of empathy itself. Ruth learns via email, in her online pursuit of any information regarding Nao's family, that Nao's father's highly specific lie— that his fake new job involved working on “empathic productivity software”— had a basis in reality. The second and last time Ozeki uses the word “empathy” in *A Tale* is in the context of an email, sent to Ruth by a psychology professor and former friend of Nao's father. This email informs Ruth that Professor Leistiko met Nao's father during the height of the latter's success working on “human-computer interface design” (306) in Silicon Valley. Originally intended solely for use in video games, these designs had recently caught the eye of the U.S. military for their potential use in weapons technology. Nao's father shows up at the professor's door “concerned that the interface he was helping to design was too seamless. What made a computer game addictive and entertaining would make it easy and fun to carry out a massively destructive bombing mission.” These concerns prompt Nao's father to bombard the professor with questions about human conscience, “trying to figure out if there was a way to build a conscience into the interface design that would assist the user by triggering his ethical sense of right and wrong and engaging his compulsion to do right.” These questions include whether conscience is dependent on a sense of individual identity, why the dictionary definition he found describes conscience as a “compulsion,” and what differentiates conscience from shame. Amidst these questions, “Is it related to empathy?” (307) is only one.

Nao's first truly open conversation with her father about difficult and personal subjects reveals that the circumstances which lead to his fall from grace as a successful programmer were

themselves related to empathy. When Nao sees her father “explode with sadness,” he originally follows his previous precedent of covering up personal struggle by retreating to the bathroom to cry out of Nao’s sight, and then coming out and cooking dinner “like everything was back to normal.” (387) At first, Nao acts in keeping with her early claim that “being polite and not saying all the things that were making us unhappy... was the only way [she and her father] knew how to love each other” (47). It is the beginning of a breakthrough in both their relationship and Nao’s growth as an empathetic being when she brings this reaction up later that night. Her father actually explains the circumstances of his layoff to Nao, telling her:

I understood how he felt, you see? Haruki Number One made his decision. He steered his airplane into a wave. He knew it was a stupid, useless gesture, but what else could he do?

I made a similar decision, also stupid and useless, only my plane was carrying our whole family. I felt so sorry for you, and for Mom, and for everyone, on account of my actions.

Nao’s father’s question about the relationship between empathy and conscience is never explicitly clarified for us in this scene; only raised for the reader to consider. What is clear is that when Nao’s father laments of his software that “killing people should not be so much fun,” (387) his implication is that his software would not be so much fun if it came with a built-in capacity for facilitating empathy for its victims. The primary function of his fun, video-game style interface design was to create distance between soldiers and the casualties of war - effectively disrupting the very kind of interpersonal boundary-crossing which enables this revelatory moment of understanding between father and daughter.

The effect of the interfaces designed by Nao’s father is the opposite of what Ruth does when she magically crosses between worlds to prevent his suicide and leave the French diary behind for Nao to find. Likewise, these interfaces work to prevent claims such as “I understood

what [Haruki No. 1] felt,” and experiences like the process Nao undergoes in the following passages describing her reaction to this revelatory information:

I stopped swinging, too, and hung there next to him. My heart was pounding, pushing the blood into my cheeks. I felt so stupid and young, and at the same time something was cracking open inside me, or maybe it was the world was cracking open to show me something really important underneath. I knew I was only seeing a tiny bit of it, but it was bigger than anything I'd ever seen or felt before.

This passage marks an end and a beginning for Nao. It is the end of her life as the teenager who, “the whole time [her father] was being persecuted for his beliefs... was just pissed off at him for getting himself fired and losing our money and ruining [her] life.” (388) It is the end of a relationship predicated on lack of communication about their feelings, and of Nao centering her feelings in her understanding of those belonging to her father. Now that Nao “finally know[s] what kind of man [her father] is,” she is able to tell her reader “I just want you to know that me and my dad are really okay.” When she ends her diary with a resolution to “buy some plain old paper and get started” writing Jiko’s life story, we understand her determination to write the life story of the woman who put the first few breaks in the “something” Nao sensed was “cracking open” upon gaining insight into her father’s true character; whether that something was “inside [Nao], or maybe... the world cracking open to show [Nao] something really important underneath.” We do not know the exact nature of this mysterious boundary, but we do know two things: Firstly, that it could not have broken without the several empathic boundary-breaking acts which precede it; secondly, that its breaking marks a shift in and expansion of Nao’s worldview.

In this chapter, my reading of Nao’s diary entries allows us to examine the important roles empathy can fulfill in a person’s life beyond the ability to relate to others. Where empathy

is at play in Nao's relationship with her author, we see that it is Nao's attempts to empathize with her future reader that make her an author in her own right, and not just a girl with a diary. Where we see empathy in her relationship to her abusive peers, as well as a peer she abuses, we understand that the connection between empathy and cruelty is more complicated than it is direct, and that it requires an understanding of the limits power dynamics impose on it for it to be complete. In Nao's relationship to Jiko, her main support and teacher figure, empathy is the power behind Jiko's support and her teachings. Jiko clarifies our understanding of the nature of empathy and the impact of practicing empathy on other people's lives. Finally, Nao's relationship with Harukis Number One and Two -- her great-uncle and her father -- demonstrates the ability of empathy for others to broaden our sense of self as well as our view of the world at large. In this way, Ozeki presents a view of empathy which is not connected as much to ideas about altruism and moral behavior as it is perspective and insight. Nao provides a good case study for this as a figure who grows in her ability to empathize. In my next chapter, I will examine a figure with a strong innate capacity for empathy. In Ruth's chapters, we get a case study for readerly empathy, and see that the impact it can have on someone's life is similarly related to ideas of worldview expansion more than it is authoritative knowledge of another person's experience.

## **Chapter 2: Ruth**

Ruth's status as a writer functioning in the role of reader comes through in the personal and speculative nature of the investment she develops in Nao's story. Our earliest example of this occurs in Ozeki's description of Ruth's very first foray into the diary: "Deliberately now, she turned to the first page, feeling vaguely prurient, like an eavesdropper or a peeping tom.

*Novelists spend a lot of time poking their noses into other people's business.* Ruth was not unfamiliar with this feeling". (12) (italics mine) These lines establish the beginning of a long and curious relationship based on "poking into another person's business," reminding us that while this diary may be written "just for one special person, and that person is *you*"<sup>18</sup> (26) opening and reading someone else's diary remains, on some level, an act of intrusion. However, we come to see that the nature of Ruth's intrusion goes beyond merely reading the details of Nao's life which the girl has chosen to share with her special reader.

Reading Nao's words and not "taking in their meaning as much as a *felt* sense, murky and emotional, of the writer's presence," Ruth immediately infers based only on the form of Nao's writing that "the fingers that had gripped the purple gel ink pen must have belonged to a girl, a teenager." Where Ruth's primary impression of this purple gel handwriting is of the writer's "moods and anxiety," Ozeki immediately establishes that Ruth's mode of reading is highly empathic. That it is also influenced by Ruth's profession as an author comes through where she uses this impression to construct a vivid picture of Nao. When Ruth claims to "know without a doubt that the girl's fingertips were pink and moist, and that she had bitten her nails down to the quick," we as Ozeki's audience have no way of knowing how much of this is "true"<sup>19</sup> about Nao, and how much of it is Ruth's imagination as an author. Ruth practices this imaginative intrusion required of her profession repeatedly throughout the text. The following passages take place after Ruth has failed to find "more information about *her* Yasutanis" after hours searching Google:

Ruth closed her eyes. In her mind, she could picture Nao, sitting by herself in the

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<sup>18</sup> In the context of Ruth's and Nao's chapters, "you" here means Ruth. However, as we read this line, it can also mean us as Ozeki's real-life audience.

<sup>19</sup> Because Nao is a fictional character, there is of course no "true" way to describe her fingernails. Her fingernails exist only in imagination - Ozeki's as the author, Ruth's as an imaginative "author-reader," and - of course - ours upon reading these passages.

darkened kitchen, waiting for her mother to bring her father home from the police station. What had those moments felt like to her? It was hard to get a sense from the diary of the texture of time passing<sup>20</sup>. No writer, even the most proficient, could re-enact in words the flow of a life lived, and Nao was hardly that skillful. The dingy kitchen was dim and still. The bar hostesses moaned and beat against the flimsy wall. The metallic clank of the key in the lock must have startled her, but she stayed where she was. Feet scuffed in the foyer. Did her parents speak? Probably not. She listened to the sound of running water as her mother filled the tub in the bathroom, and her father undressed in the bedroom. She didn't move. Didn't look up. Kept her eyes fixed on her fingers, which lay in her lap like dead things. She listened to her father bathe, and then, as her mother grimly looked on, she listened to him stumble through his confession. Did she sneak a glance at his pink cheeks and see it as shame or just the heat of the bath? Did she notice the sweat on his forehead? How many moments passed from the time he started talking until her mother stood and left the room? Did the hum of the fluorescent light sound particularly loud in the silence?

Ruth continues in this manner for an additional paragraph, taking the already novelistic details of Nao's writing and prying into intimate details beyond what real-life author Ozeki had Nao divulge. This scene reads clearly as Ruth doing what she does best - writing novelistic prose. In having Ruth do so, however, Ozeki goes beyond developing Ruth's characterization as a writer into pointing to the unique levels of interior access which fiction affords its reader<sup>21</sup>. In this

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<sup>20</sup> See page 6 of my introduction for a discussion the role time plays in literary empathy as opposed to sympathy.

<sup>21</sup> Hunt discusses ideas of interiority and an "inner self" in her connection of epistolary novels to the development of human rights. "A play, in contrast, could not linger in this way on the unfolding of an inner self, which usually has to be inferred from action or speech (see this quotation in a different context on page 2 of my introduction)... the epistolary novel was able to demonstrate that selfhood depended on qualities of "interiority" (having an inner core),

passage, Ruth acknowledges the difficulty, if not impossibility, of conveying “the flow of a life lived.” Nonetheless, in her speculations about Nao’s minute-by-minute experience of the hours following her father’s suicide attempt, she portrays the particular ability of the literary mode to convey the sense of what it means to live as someone else. The connection of this writerly mode of reading to empathy comes through with the ending line of Ruth’s extended novelistic speculation” “What did she feel at that moment?” (65) Ozeki emphasizes this line by setting it apart from all those following and preceding it. It underscores the role of this passage: To blend the boundaries between processes of reading and writing, with empathy as the shared goal which unites them.

While it is true that we as readers cannot know how whether Ruth’s speculations are “true” or not, the accuracy of her author’s imagination is important to connecting it with empathy. Ozeki is careful to have Ruth acknowledge the limits her probing insight into Nao’s inner life must necessarily possess. She accomplishes this primarily by framing many of the lines within these passages as questions: “What had those moments felt like to her? Did her parents speak?” (65) Often, however, Ruth’s statements more closely resemble those made by the omniscient narrator Ruth’s own experiences to us, such as: “She didn’t move. Didn’t look up. Kept her eyes fixed on her fingers, which lay in her lap like dead things.” Still others blend speculation with certainty, as the line “Did she sneak a glance at his pink cheeks and see it as shame or just the heat of the bath?” manages to speculate about Nao’s actions and interpretations of what she saw, while also implying certain knowledge of the color of her father’s cheeks during his confession. As where she interpreted Nao’s handwriting, Ruth reaches no

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for the characters express their inner feelings in their letters. In addition, the epistolary novel showed that all selves had this interiority (many of the characters write), and consequently that all selves were in some sense equal because all were alike in their possession of interiority.” (pages 45-48)

unreasonable conclusions in these passages. But if they represent a blended form of readerly and authorial empathy, they would seem to represent a form of empathy which is mixed on the subject of its limitations. Ruth deliberately uses her imagination to get deeper access into Nao's experience. To the extent that she oscillates between speculation and a tone of certainty, however, there is a sense in which she appears to be getting "swept away" by Nao's words<sup>22</sup>.

We have seen Nao's awareness of such limitations where reading her great-grandfather's diaries impresses her with a sense of the smallness of her own experience and her inability to fully access that of her ancestor<sup>23</sup>. In Ruth's chapters, this theme is echoed by questions of knowing versus not-knowing, and drives her deep investment in discovering what happens to Nao - she takes to Google, emails strangers, and solicits help translating Haruki Number 1's diaries partly because, in her words, "Not knowing is hard," (400) and in her husband's words, "there's nothing worse than not knowing." (381) This is not to assert that Ruth's detective-like quest to know the facts of what became of Nao is the same as her striving to understand what it was like for Nao to hear her father come home from the hospital after a suicide attempt; nor that it is equivalent to Nao's limited ability to fully understand her ancestor's experience in the Japanese army. In short, a quest to *know* is not the same as a quest to *understand*<sup>24</sup>, any more

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<sup>22</sup> Hunt repeatedly describes the way literary empathy contributes to a sense of getting "caught up" (42) or "swept away" (45) (see page 3 of my introduction for my first time quoting this language of Hunt's) in her characterization of reactions to epistolary novels by members of the 18th-century public: "[The anonymous reviewer of the novel *Pamela*] finds himself *caught up in* the plot. He trembles when Pamela is in danger, feels outrage when aristocratic characters such as Mr. B act in an unworthy fashion. His choice of words and style of speaking repeatedly reinforce the sense of emotional absorption created by the reading... The book cast a kind of spell on its readers. The narrative - the exchange of letters - unexpectedly *swept them out of themselves into a new set of experiences*" (pages 42 and 48) (Italics mine)

<sup>23</sup> See pages

<sup>24</sup> In this section, I associate the word "know" with Louise Rosenblatt's idea of "efferent" reading and the word "understand" with her notion of "aesthetic" reading. From Rosenblatt: "The efferent stance (from L. efferre, to carry away) is involved primarily with analyzing, abstracting, and accumulating what will be retained after the reading, the reading. Examples would include reading to acquire information, directions for action, or solutions to a problem. In the aesthetic stance, attention is focused primarily on experiencing what is being

than “In the earthquake and the tsunami, 15,854 people died” (400) is the same as “His voice is flat, his utterances short. ‘I have lost everything. My daughter, my son, my wife, my mother. Our house, neighbors. Our whole town.’” (111) However, Ruth could not have even tried to understand what it was like for Nao to hear her father come home from a suicide attempt without the knowledge that this occurred.

Ozeki emphasizes this theme of *knowing* versus *understanding* with her inclusion of Ruth’s husband Oliver in the process of reading Nao’s diary. That Ruth is the primary mediating reader figure of the book is obvious from the limited scope of the omniscient narrator through whose perspective the events of her chapters are related to us. That Oliver is available for processing the text alongside his wife and give his own impressions on him makes him a mediating figure in his own right; however, Ruth is clearly our central figure by virtue of not only having much more “screen time” within the novel, but of her privileged status as the only subject of the narrator’s insight into her own thoughts and feelings. This nevertheless does not diminish the significance of Oliver’s inclusion in the reading process. Examining what limited responses to Nao’s diary Ozeki affords Oliver quickly reveals him as the source of a perspective which contrasts with his wife in defining ways. This contrast is clear throughout nearly all of Ruth’s chapters and evident as early as the scene in which Ruth opens Nao’s diary for the first time. As Ruth visualizes the human behind the purple loopy handwriting, Oliver is on hand to explain the difference between flotsam and jetsam, and account for the diary’s presence on the beach as the consequence of the motions of the “elven great planetary gyres.” (13) It is only thanks to his scientific knowledge that we get the book’s earliest foreshadowing of its fantastical

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evoked, lived through, during the reading. (Rosenblatt 383)

elements, given that it is through Oliver that we learn how improbable it is that refuse from the 3/11 disaster should find its way to Canada's west coast so much sooner than projected.

When Ruth breaks from the imaginative reverie in which she finds herself upon holding "the book... warm in her hands" in order to ask "What's a gyre?" Oliver is able - and eager - to give a detailed explanation of the planet's oceanic currents lasting two pages. The language of his explanation is just clear enough, poetic enough, and sufficiently full of reverence and enthusiasm for these processes that it is unlikely to bore even the most scientifically disinclined reader. Nevertheless, Ruth serves as an avatar for such a reader in the following passage, demonstrating a strong bias for the illustrative and poetic elements of his explanation over elements that are purely informative:

"Isn't this the same as the Kuroshiro?"

He'd told her about the Kuroshiro already... But now he shook his head. "Not quite," he said. Gyres are bigger. Like a string of currents. Imagine a ring of snakes, each biting the tail of the one ahead of it. The Kuroshiro is one of four or five currents that make up the Turtle Gyre."

She nodded. She closed her eyes and pictured the snakes. (13)

This is our earliest indication of a contrast between Ruth's and her husband's preferred lenses for viewing the world. It is also more subtle about implying this contrast than future passages. Here, we see few signs that Ruth's gravitation towards poetic imagery and poor memory for scientific details has thematic significance beyond merely developing Ruth's character. These choices of characterization are given additional weight in the opening to the chapter immediately following Nao's account of the Chuo Rapid Express incident. As Ruth sits in bed brimming with empathy for what she has read, Oliver's first response is to "tentatively" express his interest in Nao's

mention that one of her father's few activities in the midst of his suicidal depression was to sit in the park feeding the crows. It is only her knowledge that her husband is "aware that his responses were often irregular" and that "this worried him" which keeps Ruth from voicing her thought that "After everything she'd just read - about Nao's life, the girl's father, the situation at school - that his mind would alight upon the crows! There were so many other pressing things she would have preferred to discuss..." Ruth instead makes the empathic choice to ask Oliver to elaborate. The following passages side by side emphasize the contrast between their different styles of thinking, and the seeming incompatibility of these styles with each other:

"Well," he said, sounding relieved. It's just funny that she should mention them, because I've been doing some reading about Japanese crows. The native species there is *Corvus japonensis*, which is a subspecies of *Corvus macrorhynchos*, the Large-billed or Jungle Crow. It's quite different from the American Crow -"

"This is Canada," she said, interrupting him even as her mind drifted elsewhere. "We should have Canadian crows." She was imagining Nao's father, sitting on his bench. Every morning he woke, got dressed in his cheap blue suit, ate his breakfast, walked his daughter to school. Maybe he'd fish a copy of the morning newspaper out of the recycling on his way to the park, to read on the bench.

"Well, yes," Oliver said. "As I was about to say, the crow native to these parts is *Corvus cauninus*, the Northwestern Crow. Almost identical to the American Crow, only smaller. (54)

These passages demonstrate this contrast as the same contrast which exists between modes of understanding and modes of knowing. As Ruth gropes to understand the experience of Nao's

father, Oliver's mind draws on what he knows to solve the mystery of what he doesn't know - namely, why a crow matching his knowledge of crows exclusively found in Japan was in his garden in Canada the day that Ruth found the freezer bag containing Nao's diary.

While the existence of a contrast between Ruth's and Oliver's respective reading modes is obvious, the nature of that contrast and its relationship to empathy is less so. It would be easy to classify Ruth's as the literary mode to her husband's scientific mode, given that the most evident difference in their impression of the diary is the difference between literary prose and scientific fact. For my purposes, however, given my preestablished characterization of Ruth's literary response as an empathetic response, it becomes necessary to question whether this difference is rooted in a difference of empathy. At first glance, it appears fair to characterize Ruth's response as empathetic, and Oliver's as representing a mode too objective and detached to be associated with empathy. However, to describe Oliver's response as unempathic would seem to contradict his obviously caring nature. "Unempathic" in the face of a story like Nao's implies a cold or even cruel character, and when Ozeki writes that "the story of the bullying made [Oliver] angry," it is particularly clear that Ruth's husband is a compassionate man. The following passage clarifies a reading of Oliver as a complicating the relationship between empathy and moral concern:

"I hate that," he said. "How could the school allow that to happen? How could that teacher participate?"

..."But it makes total sense," Oliver said, glumly. We live in a bully culture. Politicians, Corporations, the banks, the military. All bullies and crooks. They steal, they torture people, they make these insane rules and set the tone."

... “Look at Guantanamo. Look at Abu Ghraib. America’s bad, but Canada’s no better. People just keep going with the program, too scared to speak up. Look at the tar sands. Just like Tepco. I fucking hate it.” ()

Here we see Oliver understandably baffled by the individual human cruelty Nao describes. His glum conclusion that this cruelty actually “makes total sense” is rooted not in empathetic engagement with the individual human, but analysis of humanity on the level of social structures. Oliver draws important connections and makes valuable insights in these lines, ones which prove his concern with justice and the well-being of others. But they nonetheless once again demonstrate knowledge more than they do understanding - this time of politics, rather than science.

That is not to imply a hierarchy between these modes, with Ruth’s understanding above Oliver’s knowing. Oliver’s “irregular” insights are important to the narrative in their own right. That his knowledge-based insights can sometimes be even better at interpreting other humans than Ruth’s more imaginative and emotionally-based responses derives support from the scene where he and Ruth process one of Nao’s most tragic chapters:

“I’m sorry,” she said, “But I just don’t understand you. The girl is attacked, tied up and almost raped, her video gets put up on some fetish website, her underpants get auctioned off to some pervert, her pathetic father sees all this and instead of doing anything to help her he tries to kill himself in the bathroom, where she has to find him - after all that, the only thing you can say is Babette is cool? It’s sad about the *bugs*?”

“Oh.”

A few more hundred moments passed.

“I see your point,” he said. (293)

Ruth's incredulity is based in Oliver's seeming lack of empathy for Nao's trauma. His lack of focus on the details of her intimate human experience at the expense of details such as the bug fights and the uniqueness of Akiba Electricity Town comes across as a lack of emotional investment in the human element, or affective empathy. His inability to pick up on Babette's deception demonstrates a lack of social intelligence, a capacity heavily based in cognitive empathy<sup>25</sup>. To his credit as a compassionate and kind person, Oliver is quick to realize the "irregularity" of his response when confronted with it, even if Ruth must explain Babette's true intentions to him before he realizes "Babette is cool" is as inappropriate a response to these heart-wrenching sections of the diary as "I'd like to go to Akiba someday." His lack of empathic skill is not something of which he is unaware.

This understanding of Oliver as unempathetic gets subverted, however, when Oliver points out to Ruth that she is actually the one who has failed to understand Nao's father's experience and intentions. Up until this point in their exchange, Ruth has maintained her calm with Oliver, only "losing it" when he broaches his theory that "it's not true that Nao's father didn't try to help... He did try to help. He was bidding. He was trying to win the auction [for Nao's underwear, put up for sale online by her classmates]." In characteristic logical Oliver fashion, he has deduced this from his memory of the scientific name of an origami beetle for which Nao's father won first prize in an insect-themed origami sculpture contest. His skill with classification and remembering details allows him to infer that "C.imperator," the username of "The guy who lost the auction... was Nao's father." This inference grants him the insight that Nao's father was not in this case acting as the weak and cowardly man which both Ruth and Nao

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<sup>25</sup> For my discussion of affective and cognitive empathy, see pages 7-8.

suppose him to be at this point in the novel. In this way, Oliver's seemingly unempathic approach actually grants him greater insight into the experience of another human than his wife, whose strong empathic identification with Nao has blinded her to the same things to which Nao remains blind.

That Oliver here is actually practicing empathic understanding more successfully than his wife at this point is supported by Ruth's reflections on Oliver's character which close out this chapter. Where Ruth reflects that "he was the least egotistical man she'd ever met," considering his botanical land art projects "successful only when he himself disappeared from them," she reflects on his success at exactly the kind of self-decentralization which I have previously argued is a vital component of the empathic process<sup>26</sup>. The placement of this characterization of Oliver directly after his argument with Ruth points strongly to this chapter as working to problematize a reading of Oliver as an unempathic reader of Nao's text. We are left with the impression that insight into the "thoughts and feelings of another" can take seemingly unempathic forms.

In attempting to make sense of this distinction between Ruth's and Oliver's modes of reading, it is useful to turn to the questions raised by Nao's father. Before seeking help with resolving his ethical dilemma from Dr. Leistiko, Nao's father consulted the dictionary definition of the word "conscience." There, he found a contradiction between its etymology and its contemporary usage:

"Con-sci-ence. When I search for this word in the English dictionary, I find that it is from Latin. Con means 'with,' and science means 'knowing.' So conscience means 'with knowing.' With science."

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<sup>26</sup> See page 35 for my discussion of the importance of self-decentralization to empathy.

“I’ve never quite thought about it that way,” I told him. “But I’m sure you’re right.”

He continued. “But this does not make sense.” He pulled out a piece of paper. “The dictionary says ‘A knowledge or sense of right and wrong, with a compulsion to do right.’”

He held out the piece of paper for me to see, so I took it. “That seems like a reasonable definition.”

“But I do not understand. Knowledge and sense are not the same thing. Knowledge I understand, but how about sense? Is sense the same as feeling? Is conscience a fact that I can learn and know, or is it more like an emotion? Is it related to empathy? Is it different than shame? And why is it a compulsion?” (307)

Reading this passage armed with questions about the difference between how Ruth and Oliver read Nao’s diary, Nao’s father appears to be describing the husband-wife pair exactly. Both are readers armed with strong consciences. They are extremely upset by the injustices Nao endures on the basis of their being wrong, and are strongly invested in the possibility that things will go right for her by the diary’s end. But Ruth repeatedly demonstrates her weakness with “scientific knowing”, and Oliver, while adept at seeing patterns and removing himself from the picture, is insensible to many of the more intimate, human details of Nao’s experiences. Where Nao’s father questions how the phenomenon of conscience can be described as simultaneously something which is sensed and something which is known, he reminds us that this is a trait which both conscience and empathy share<sup>27</sup>. Oliver is unskilled in both the social intelligence

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<sup>27</sup> See pages 7-8 for my review of the distinction between affective and cognitive empathy.

required of cognitive empathy and the sensitivity to emotional contagion necessary for affective empathy. Nonetheless, Ruth's strength in both of these areas blind her to the reality of Nao's father's real experience, demonstrating that empathy is not the only way of gaining "interior access" the mental state of another person. In this way, Oliver shows how different readers and different modes of reading can change the reality of a text, and that Ruth's empathic way is not necessarily the best or most accurate.

Ruth's chapters do not consist entirely of her isolated reactions to Nao's text, however. She has a life outside of Nao's life, and problems of her own - problems which, it is implied, she would prefer to avoid. One of these is that despite her authorial reading of Nao's writing, Ruth has not authored any of her own writing in some time. Ozeki's frequent mentions of the memoir Ruth began and abandoned "months, possibly even a year" (63) before finding Nao's diary, and her feelings around the way "every time she contemplated the memoir, her mind contracted and she felt inexplicably sleepy... New words just refused to come" do not exist only in the isolated realm of Ruth's mind, delivered to us through third-person narration. They are reinforced as the pressing problems they are when two different neighbors ask the exact same question on two different occasions: "How's the new book coming?". The first of these occasions, Ruth "brace[es] herself", implying that she has been asked this question many times throughout her interactions with her island neighbors. The second instance ends a section of a chapter, emphasizing both the repetition and the fact that Ruth has not been using Nao's diary as "good material" (34) for her own writing. It is not that Ruth does not think of writing her memoir, or register her procrastination, until the outside world reminds her. However, as the novel progresses and the only signs of authorship on Ruth's part appear in scenes of her reading Nao's

diary<sup>28</sup>, we see that she is using her empathy for Nao as a conduit for energy which would be more responsibly directed into her own writing. Ruth's neighbors highlight this role of the diary - and specifically, Ruth's empathetic investment in it - in the novelist's life. The urgency their reminders bring, when combined with the depth of Ruth's empathetic investment, elevate the diary from a means of distraction to a means of escape.

Similarly, Ruth reflects on her complicated feelings around her "trading one island for another" - her seemingly simple move from Manhattan, NYC to the tellingly named Desolation Sound - throughout her chapters, but Ozeki uses Ruth's neighbors to emphasize the pressing and unpleasant dimensions of these feelings. We see this where Ruth's neighbor Muriel engages in the island custom of a "drop-in": a practice of making announced visits which Ruth describes as being as much "a part of the nature of the island" as it is in Oliver's nature to find the custom so "unsettling" that "once he had even hidden in an old refrigerator box in the basement when he heard the sound of tires coming up the driveway" . The narrator tells us that Ruth does not hate this custom to the same extreme extent as her husband. However, the following line makes it clear she finds it a disruption: "And then, if that wasn't bad enough, she heard the sound of tires, rolling up the driveway." (92) "That" in this scene refers to Ruth's realization that she has spent hours on searching the internet for "The sound of tires rolling up the driveway" is not enough to make Ruth hide in a box, but it is clear that it aggravates her desire to *escape* in much the same way as it does her husband's. Ostensibly the result of a simple case of culture shock, this couching of a friendly visit in terms of being an unwelcome disruption connects Ruth's neighbors to an outside world Ruth would prefer to avoid dealing with. These scenes stand in

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<sup>28</sup> See my discussion of Ruth's authorly reading on pages 40-44 of this chapter

contrast to the scenes where Ruth's mind is completely occupied with problems other than her own.

Ruth acknowledges that she uses her investment in Nao's story as a means of escaping from the problems in her own life. She is reluctant to even read Nao's story at first, resisting the "ridiculous" (29) sense of urgency driving her empathetic interest in what the girl has to say. We see the hold Nao's diary has over Ruth's mind in one early scene where she has retired to her study in an attempt to make progress on her memoir. This attempt is stymied when she finds herself unable to even look at the Pacific Ocean through the window in her study without thinking of Nao, conveyed to us by our third-person narrator asking "Was the girl out there somewhere in all that water, her body decomposed by now, redistributed by the waves?" Answering this question with another question conveying Ruth's conscientious resistance to the urge to escape doing her work by wondering about Nao, Ozeki ends an extended section of Ruth upbraiding herself for neglecting her memoir with the following line: "What was she [Ruth] doing wasting precious hours on someone else's story?" However, the very first sentence of the passage following all of this self-chastisement is "She picked up the diary and, using the side of her thumb, started riffling through the pages." (30) Far from inspiring her to write, the urgency of her own responsibilities only drives Ruth deeper into the diary. We get an image of Ruth as running away from the encroaching figure of her work, using Nao's diary as her escape route.

Once Ruth has spent enough days in this cycle of trying to write and immersing herself in Nao's writing instead, such that there cannot be "any denying that Nao's diary was a distraction," (64) Ruth has taken her procrastination beyond simply reading Nao's diary. A similar urge to that which drives her bouts of authorly imagining of Nao's internal experience also drives Ruth to frantically search the internet for any information she can find about Nao and

her family. Had Ruth merely been interested in Nao's diary as a story, as an entertaining diversion from her own work, she would not claim through the omniscient voice of the narrator that "she *needed* more information about *her* Yasutanis" (64) (italics mine). The language in this section is the language of a highly personal investment in, and even feeling of personal ownership over, the experiences of others. Knowing about the lives of this family is a personal *need*, brought about by her feeling that there is a sense in which these lives belong to *her*. When it is clear that there is no information about "her Yasutanis" to be found on the internet, Ruth concludes that "the only way to find [more information] is to read further in the diary" (64). This desire to enter more fully into Nao's experiences demonstrates that reading that Ruth's escape is rooted in something more than just reading Nao's diary as it is. It is her particularly empathetic mode of reading, of being driven by a personal investment in the life of a person separate from her own so strong, it is as if this other life is her own<sup>29</sup>.

Not even a reader as empathic as Ruth can turn these metaphorical feelings of ownership into literal ownership, however. Ruth's using Nao's diary as a form of escapism goes very far - as far as her actually entering Nao's world in her dreams and affecting the outcome of the girl's story. But even in these fantastical passages, as with any time Ruth enters the world of Nao's text in any capacity, our mediating reader must inevitably return to her own fictional life. Ruth illustrates the reciprocal nature of literary empathy in her reflections on both her own life and her "as-if-it-is-her-own" life,

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<sup>29</sup> Hunt references such feelings of ownership where she uses the language of "identification" to describe the process of readerly empathy: "We cannot help but identify with Pamela and experience with her the potential erasure of social distance as well as the threat to her self-possession... The reader simultaneously *becomes* Pamela even while imagining him-/herself as a friend of hers and as an outside observer" (43 and 45) (italics mine)

At this point, we have seen Nao empathize in with Haruki No. 1 in a way which is self-aware of limits, through the lens of her own experiences with *ijime*. We have seen Ruth empathize with Nao in a creative and imaginative way, through the lens of her authorial imagination. And we have seen Oliver apply his analytic understanding of social systems and the scientific names of bugs to the same end as these more conventional empathetic processes. All of these are cases of individuals applying their understanding of their own experiences to the end of understanding the experiences of others. Similar to the way Nao is taught, during her visit to Jiko's temple on "Mount Metaphor," about Buddhist notions of nonduality using the example of a surfer and a wave, empathy in *A Tale* is a practice strongly rooted in the bridging action of metaphor. And just as a bridge does not provide one-way passage, neither does Ruth's reading of Nao's diary consist solely in her arriving at better understanding of Nao's experiences through applying her own experience as a novelist. This two-way, reader-author boundary-breaking effect of literary empathy is effectively summed up in the following lines from Proust, which Ozeki tellingly uses to divide Part I of the novel from Part II:

*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 permit him to discern what, without the book, he would perhaps never have seen in himself. The reader's recognition in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its truth.*

Ruth comes away from Nao's passage on "furiitaa"<sup>30</sup> thinking, "That's us. Frittering our lives away" (83). After reading the diary's early passages, thinking about the vividness and realness of her old life in New York becomes thinking about how it is "[l]ike Nao's Sunnyvale" (95). These

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<sup>30</sup> From Ruth's own footnote: "furiitaa —a freelance worker, from the English free + German arbeiter."

are instances of the kind of “self-reading” which Proust describes. In arriving at these new ways of contextualizing her own experiences with writing and living in an unfamiliar place, Ruth is not necessarily discerning things she “would never have seen in herself.” It is not the things themselves that are new so much as the ways in which she now thinks about them; that is, through the lens of Nao’s experiences frittering away her time in Tokyo coffee shops, missing her old life in California.

Ruth’s escapism into Nao’s story can never be a true escape, because Ruth’s own experiences follow and inform her reading of Nao’s life. But just as Ruth invariably approaches Nao’s life through her own subjective lens, there is a peculiar, *literary* sense in which her time inhabiting Nao’s world follows her as she goes about her own business in Desolation Sound. This is not to imply that reading helps Ruth address or solve her problems. By the end of the novel, Ruth has not been made any further progress on her memoir, nor has she acted on her feelings of missing New York City and made plans to move back. Ruth frequently applies Nao’s words to her feelings about living in Desolation Sound, but more rarely to her issues writing her memoir, thereby proving the limits of the ability of literary empathy to help a reader in their own life. Ruth’s conflict over her move away from New York City primarily requires making sense of her own feelings. Writing her memoir, by contrast, is something she must simply sit down and *do*. Reading the writing of someone else who wrote regularly and consistency, “approach[ing] the page with such certainty” that Ruth hasn’t had in “years,” does not motivate Ruth to do the same. Empathizing with Nao’s struggles in Japan has likewise not given Ruth any concrete tools for changing her own feelings of alienation where she is, but it has changed the way she understands them. She has no new insight into how to move forward, but empathizing with Nao has given her new lenses through which to view where she already is.

This new perspective is enough for Ozeki to conclude the book's final chapter with less of a sense of anticlimax than with a sense of peace:

...“Are you happy?” he asked. “Here? In this world?”

Surprised, she stood there and thought about his question. “Yes, I suppose I am. At least for now.”

The answer seemed to satisfy him. He gave her wrist a squeeze and then let go.

“Okay,” he said, returning to his New Yorker. “That’s good enough.”(401)

Ruth’s answer to her husband’s question is heavily informed by her experience reading Nao’s diary. It is unclear whether, had Ruth not had this literary-empathetic experience, her answer would have been something other than “I am”. What is clear is that this conversation was prompted by questions the diary raised, and therefore might not have taken place without it. Her specific phrasing furthermore makes it likely that when Ruth “thought about [Oliver’s] question,” she thought about Nao’s “obsession with *now*” (238) and Jiko’s last words urging Nao and her father to live ““For now... For the time being.”” She has learned to see her dilemma through a Nao-inspired lens, and while this is not a solution, it enables Ozeki to end the novel with a resolution that is satisfying. The final passage of *A Tale* therefore leaves us with the idea that literary empathy doesn’t help us to solve our problems any more than empathizing with the characters in a book allows to become them. There is only a distinctive, metaphorical “sense” in which these things can be equated; a literary sense which is no more the same as a literal sense than it is different.

In this chapter, I examined the other end of the reader-author pair that is Nao and Ruth to understand the characteristics and impacts of empathic reading. I arrived at an understanding of Ruth’s reading of Nao which strongly resembles authorship in the extent to which it attempts to

reach empathic understanding of its subject. Ruth's relationship with her husband Oliver reminds us to be critical of empathy as the only method of gaining insight to the experience of another person, by showing how someone unskilled in both commonly accepted subsets of empathy can still understand someone better than a powerfully empathic reader like Ruth. Ruth's avoidance of her island neighbors provides a picture of empathic reading as a form of escape -- to the extent that empathic reading allows us to feel as though someone else's life is our life, it grants us the ability to leave ourselves and our problems behind. Finally, I showed that literary empathy can have a similar worldview-broadening effect as the interpersonal empathic skills which Nao acquired over the course of the novel. Taken all together, I arrive at a picture of literary empathy -- what Ruth Ozeki describes as "the ability to try on another person's story for a brief, fleeting moment" -- as not primarily important for its ability to authoritatively know what it is like to live as someone else. This is supported by how, at the end of the novel, Ruth can still only speculate about what has become of Nao. Rather than teaching us any particular truth existing in the outside world, literary empathy in *A Tale* is a tool for expanding our ability to figure out such truths for ourselves. In short, literature "matters" not because it grants us any literal ability to live as someone else. Instead, through its temporary approximation of this experience, it is important for our ability to expand the boundaries of what it means to live as ourselves.

## Conclusion

I set out with this Project to learn the kinds of things that only stories can teach us. In doing so, I was fuelled by my desire to reconcile what I feared was a dichotomy between the “removed” world of literature, and the “connected” outside world. Reading *A Tale* with a mind towards empathy has reminded me that in order to connect meaningfully with people and experiences outside of yourself, it is important that you be armed with a variety of tools for making sense of what you see.

Empathy can be one of those tools. Whether reading literature develops this ability in us is a hot topic of debate with no definitive consensus. I never had any intention of settling this debate with my project. It is not the kind of debate you can settle with close reading. This is another of the similarities both a work of literature and the process of empathizing --both are strongly limited acts, focusing on the small scale of an individual’s experience. To treat either one in themselves as conveying broader truths would be to underestimate the complexity of both phenomena.

As Nao reminds us, the real power in both empathy and reading lies in the “magic” that occurs when parties work together to create something which can exist only with the cooperation of all of its parts. To empathize in only one direction is to project yourself onto someone else. To talk only of your impression of a book without a grounding in the text is to write a very bad paper.

In choosing the quotation with which I opened this project, its most interesting aspect to me was that it was not a direct quote from Ozeki herself. Nowhere in the actual article in which it

appears does Ozeki talk about what makes literature “matter.” This is a closing line, an interpretation of the actual quotes about Buddhism and identity which precede it. It’s an impactful closing line, but what is it about the identity-assuming magic of the “time being” spent reading which makes it “matter?”

If the reader of my project takes away one aspect of the endless answers to this question, I hope it is the understanding that “trying on another person’s story” necessarily involves that other person’s story molding itself to the shape of our own.

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