A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING

Ruth Ozeki

Analysis by Francesco De Sorbo

Biographical Novel, Eco-Fiction, Philosophical Novel

Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) is a novel about the Tōhoku disaster. Weaving together geology, Japanese Folklore, and digital media, Ozeki's representation of the 2011 earthquake and resulting tsunami transforms the disruptive power of earthquakes into a narrative device that fosters connection and solidarity across geographical and cultural borders.

Year of Publication	2013
Publication Place	Edinburgh
Editor	Canongate Books Ltd
Entity	Great East Japan Earthquake / Tohoku-Oki earthquake

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake Great East Japan Earthquake / Tohoku-Oki earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	11 March 2011 14:46:24 JST (05:46:24 UTC)
Location	Pacific Ocean Japan
Coordinates	38.3219444, 142.369
Impacted Areas	Pacific coast of northeastern Honshu
Seismic Fault	Plate boundary between the Pacific and North America plates
Magnitude	9.0–9.1 Ricther

Typology

Tectonic Earthquake

"On March 11, 2011, the 2011 Tohoku-Oki earthquake occurred off the Pacific coast of northeastern Honshu, Japan. The event was a dip-slip rupture of the plate boundary between the

Pacific and North America plates, and the moment magnitude (MW) of this event was 9.0, which is the largest value ever recorded in Japan. This gigantic event excited a huge tsunami, which struck the Pacific coast of Japan resulting in nearly 20,000 people dead or missing” (Saito et al. 1)

Anthropization Level

Houses

"Communities across northeastern Japan (Tohoku Region) suffered extensive and severe structural damage as a result of the earthquake and tsunami, including heavy damage to roads, railways, and airports, as well as many homes being left without electricity, gas and water. In total, approximately 122,000 buildings were completely destroyed, about 283,000 suffered severe damage, and another approximately 748,000 were partially damaged.” ("Reconstruction Agency")

Public Buildings

"Communities across northeastern Japan (Tohoku Region) suffered extensive and severe structural damage as a result of the earthquake and tsunami, including heavy damage to roads, railways, and airports, as well as many homes being left without electricity, gas and water. In total, approximately 122,000 buildings were completely destroyed, about 283,000 suffered severe damage, and another approximately 748,000 were partially damaged.” ("Reconstruction Agency")

Cities

"Communities across northeastern Japan (Tohoku Region) suffered extensive and severe structural damage as a result of the earthquake and tsunami, including heavy damage to roads, railways, and airports, as well as many homes being left without electricity, gas and water. In total, approximately 122,000 buildings were completely destroyed, about 283,000 suffered severe damage, and another approximately 748,000 were partially damaged.” ("Reconstruction Agency")

Nuclear Power Plants

“The extent and consequences of the nuclear contamination on marine and land environments (including animals, plants, and crops) in Fukushima and beyond remain largely unknown, and it is hard to come by reliableinformationonthistopicthatisneithera government-sanctioned denial of the problem nor sensationalist apocalyptic rhetoric (Rots 3).

Factories

"a fairly traditional and conservative region of small companies, emigration, and hard-working people” (Rambelli 51)

Sea Coast

"On March 11, 2011, the 2011 Tohoku-Oki earthquake occurred off the Pacific coast of northeastern Honshu, Japan" (Saito et al. 1)

Ecological Impacts

Pollution

"The ecological impact of 3.11 is vast and long-lasting. The cooling system in the nuclear plant has been contaminated, meaning that more than one million tons of polluted water remains inside. Many trees were felled as they absorbed radiation and would slowly release it into the atmosphere. Soil in several zones also became highly radioactive and had to be removed, still stored today in so-called “flecon” (flexible container) bags piled in mounds, awaiting disposal" (Ragazzi 6)

Tsunami

"This gigantic event excited a huge tsunami, which struck the Pacific coast of Japan resulting in nearly 20,000 people dead or missing” (Saito et al. 1)

Sea Pollution

“The extent and consequences of the nuclear contamination on marine and land environments (including animals, plants, and crops) in Fukushima and beyond remain largely unknown, and it is hard to come by reliableinformationonthistopicthatisneithera government-sanctioned denial of the problem nor sensationalist apocalyptic rhetoric (Rots 3).

Destruction Of Animal Species

"Dairy production, fisheries and air were contaminated. Domestic animals suffered sickness and death. Fukushima is considered to be the most catastrophic manmade accident in nuclear history,

and the ongoing decommissioning of the plant and reparation of damages is calculated to last between 20 and 30 years” (Ragazzi 6)

Social Impacts	Deaths
	"The magnitude 9.0 earthquake was followed by a 40-m tsunami, which subsequently caused a nuclear accident, killing 19,729 people, and leaving 6233 people injured, with an additional 2559 people missing and presumed dead" (Nanako et al. 1)
	Injuries
	"The magnitude 9.0 earthquake was followed by a 40-m tsunami, which subsequently caused a nuclear accident, killing 19,729 people, and leaving 6233 people injured, with an additional 2559 people missing and presumed dead" (Nanako et al. 1)
	Destruction Of Goods/Commodities
	"heavy damage to roads, railways, and airports, as well as many homes being left without electricity, gas and water" ("Reconstruction Agency")
	Destruction Of Public Buildings
	"In total, approximately 122,000 buildings were completely destroyed, about 283,000 suffered severe damage, and another approximately 748,000 were partially damaged" ("Reconstruction Agency")
	Destruction Of Facilities
	The cooling system in the nuclear plant has been contaminated, meaning that more than one million tons of polluted water remains inside" (Ragazzi 6)

Earthquake Tohoku-Oki earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	14:46:24 JST (05:46:24 UTC)
Location	Pacific Ocean Japan
Impacted Areas	Miyagi Coast, Eastern Coast of Canada (debris)
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	Plate boundary between the Pacific and North America plates
Magnitude	9.0–9.1
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Towns, Nuclear Power Plants, Sea Coast, Religious Buildings And Sites
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes, Tsunami, Pollution, Sea Pollution
Social Impacts	Deaths, Injuries, Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites), Destruction Of Dwellings, Trauma, Destruction Of Public Buildings

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Muji
Age	Old
Gender	Woman
Native Place	Japan
Nationality	Japanese
Reactions	Awareness, Fear

Reactions

Name	Ruth
Age	Adult
Gender	Woman
Native Place	Us
Nationality	Japanese-american
Reactions	Immobility, Terror, Empathy, Anxiety, Discomfort, Wonder, Helplessness

Name	Oliver
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	British Columbia
Nationality	Canadian
Reactions	Cooperation, Order, Fear, Curiosity, Fascination, Sharing Of Information, Rationality

Name	Nojima
Age	Late Thirties/early Fourties
Gender	Male
Native Place	Miyagi Prefecture
Nationality	Japanese
Reactions	Despair

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Religious people
Reactions	Madness

Group Attitudes

Name	The population
Reactions	Awareness, Mitigation, Compensation

Name	Old People
Reactions	Terror, Wonder, Awe

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	"Earthquake And Tsunami" (Ozeki 31) "Tragedy" (67) "Fallout" (90) "Devastation" (119) "Wreckage" (119) "Calamity" (211) "Havoc" (211) "Destruction" (212) "Collateral Damage" (212) "Lightning Bolts" (2012)
Metaphors	"a horrible dream" (Ozeki 120) "an angry earthquake catfish" (211) "malevolent fish" (211)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Deified Nature, Hyperdisaster, Mythical Creatures, Evil
Syntax	High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	No Peculiarities

GEOLOGY, MEMORY, AND TRANSPACIFIC CONNECTIONS IN RUTH OZEKI'S *A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING*

The earthquake that devastated northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011 triggered a catastrophic tsunami, which left an indelible mark on Japanese society with subsequent Fukushima nuclear meltdown. This triple disaster claimed approximately 20,000 lives and displaced over 400,000 people, generating not only unprecedented material destruction, but also profound psychological trauma that reverberated through Japan's collective memory.

Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) can be read as a literary exploration of how disaster narratives can create cultural and emotional connection across vast oceanic distances. Furthermore, it interrogates digital memory's relationship to human tragedy, the planetary implications of geological events, and the enduring relevance of traditional Japanese earthquake folklore in contemporary disaster understanding.

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 undersea earthquake occurred in northeastern Honshu, Japan. The shocks were produced by a "dip-slip rupture of the plate boundary between the Pacific and North America plates" (Saito et al.1), and resulted in a 40-m tsunami that led to the notorious nuclear accident of Fukushima, and the "nuclear contamination on marine and land environments (including animals, plants, and crops)" (Rots 3).

The damages of this triple-disaster were enormous. Overall, around 20.000 people lost their lives, while 6233 were injured, with an additional 2559 people missing and presumed dead. With buildings and houses destroyed or damaged, more than 400,000 people were displaced" (Nanako et al. 1).

Nonetheless, these data are perhaps insufficient to fully understand the trauma that the Tohoku-Oki earthquake has permanently imprinted on the fabric of Japanese society. As British-Canadian scholar Roy Starrs suggests, "['3/11'] shook Japan as much as '9/11' shook the US" (Starrs 3), etching in the national consciousness as a defining tragedy for contemporary Japanese identity. The triple disaster tore open a wound within the public sphere, prompting widespread scrutiny of governmental policies and questions regarding its crisis management. At the same time, '3/11' also forced the population to confront a heightened sense of collective vulnerability and to navigate the pervasive grief that followed in its wake ("Reconstruction Agency").

A peculiar response to this crisis came from the world of arts and culture. Several artists decided to engage with local communities, working together to elaborate the collective sense of despair and reflect on recovery strategies that could address both the material and psychological losses. For instance, the initiative of "The Omoide Salvage Project", coordinated by Photographer Munemasa Takahashi, was developed to rescue and clean 800,000 photographs in Yamamoto-chō, Miyagi Prefecture. The general idea was to help people to gain back a part of their lives swept away by the earthquake and the tsunami. On a deeper level, though, this artistic operation also entailed a re-evaluation of the role of artefacts and objects. In the words of Art anthropologist Rossella Ragazzi (2022):

A catastrophe is a social experience. Any material trace of damage becomes enhanced in its poignancy and seems to cry to be shared for its multiple meanings. New questions about the value of living together and how to do so emerge from the rubble. Even the most anonymous, unidentifiable objects become imbued not only with face-value, but with a quality of agency. The invisible links of one's connection to the past and a community's continuity with a discarded time-space become densely intertwined. (16)

In this respect, the 'debris' left by quakes is conceivable not simply as 'storied matter', i.e. materials vector capable of narrating the disaster, but, most importantly, as agents of connection and amplifiers of the meaning attributed to the earthquake.

This idea of connection, fostered by material relics of the earthquake, constitutes the core symbolic element which structures Ruth Ozeki's *a Tale for the Time Being* (2013). Among the textual media represented in the novel, such as footnotes, e-mails, letters, appendixes, and ideograms, *A Tale for the Time Being* features the fictionalisation of a Japanese teenager's diary. At the beginning of the story, the diary of Nao is found on the coast of British Columbia by the novel's other female protagonist, Japanese American writer Ruth - Ozeki's fictional counterpart. It is Ruth's partner, though, Canadian land artist Oliver, who links the recovery of the diary to the earthquake and tsunami of 3.11. His initial hypothesis grows stronger during the novel and after the reading of Nao's diary. Indeed, the couple concludes that the diary must have been originally located in a Buddhist temple "near the coast and the epicenter of the earthquake, and more or less in the path of the tsunami". As the tidal waves approached, it must have been put by her owner in a plastic bags with "[Nao's] most precious things inside – her diary, Haruki's letters and the watch…" (Ozeki 401), to finally be washed ashore in Canada thanks to the currents in the Pacific. The device of the lost journal creates a sense of authenticity and proximity and with the facts narrated.

In Ozeki's novel, the motive of the oceanic movement retains an important role. In the words of Claudia Dellacasa, the representation of the ocean "invites readers to consider the possibility that the novel is self-consciously structured in ways that evoke waves and wave pattern" (Dellacasa 2024). This wave-like pattern is also present on a syntactical level, especially visible in the way the novel echoes the event of 3/11. While referring to the Tōhoku-Oki catastrophe, the novel repeatedly uses noun phrases that shift temporal references. For example: "In the months just after March 11" (90),

“In the morning of March 11” (119), “In the days following the earthquake and tsunami” (120), and “In the two weeks following the earthquake, tsunami, and meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear reactors” (121). This recurring, yet slightly varied phrasing, establishes a pattern of temporal alternation. The repetition, with subtle modifications, mirrors the rhythm of waves, returning again and again in slightly altered forms, and evoking the lingering presence of debris.

This repetition can also be associated with Ruth’s anxious feelings. Being of Japanese descent, Ruth experiences a personal and painful involvement with the 2011 earthquake, which is also defined as a “horrible dream” (120). Her state is even worsened by her apprehension for the life of Nao and the young girl’s family. Ruth spends her days obsessively inspecting the People Finder website, “looking through lists of names of the victims of the earthquake and tsunami” (67). Her anxious search for the diary’s young owner leads her to carefully survey the reports available and the endless “files that people had posted of the missing, looking for likely matches. The information was sparse where the victims worked, where they’d last been seen, and what they’d been wearing” (67).

During her long search for answers, Ruth also reflects on the paradox of digital memory, i.e. on how modern technology both illuminates and obscures the human reality of disaster. On the one hand, digital and visual media enable her to experience a more direct contact with information related to the event. Indeed, Ruth watches videos recording how “whole towns get crushed and swept away in a matter of moments” (121) and hears the story of survivors, such as that of Nojima, a sanitation worker in the Miyagi Prefecture, who “ha[s] lost everything” (119). On the other hand, the very same data collected by web analytics point to a void hidden beneath the reconstruction of the disastrous event. Thousands of people were not simply dead, but rather “vanished, buried alive or sucked back out to sea by the outflow of the wave. Their bodies were never found” (429). From this perspective, Ruth meditates on how, despite the richness in information collected so far, for each instant captured online, there were “so many other moments [that] simply vanished” (121), thereby questioning even the possibility of comprehending “the fullness of the tragedy” (67).

From a figurative perspective, the destruction brought upon the Japanese population is epitomised by the image of the “wall of black water” (121, 122). The colour attributed to the tidal waves symbolises the oblivion into which both the victims and the survivors are cast, plummeting in an engulfing darkness that erases lives and landscapes. In truth, Ruth never learns whether Nao is still alive, mirroring the uncertain fate of many survivors who are left in a state of partial knowledge about the fates of their loved ones. A condition Ruth describes as “the harsh reality of this world, at least” (429).

In the novel, the ocean’s currents act as means of communication that carry and spread stories across the globe. This aspect is underlined by Oliver, who, being both a scientist and a land artist, possesses a nuanced understanding of geology as well as its deeper ontological implications. Oliver lucidly explains how the diary, initially identified as a “flotsam” (13), potentially washed up on the coast of Vancouver by “escaping the orbit of the Pacific Gyre” (13) along with the other debris and “[a]ll that stuff from people’s homes in Japan that the tsunami swept out to sea” (14).

Ozeki highlights how the catastrophe that hit Japan has had planetary repercussions. For instance, the earthquake-induced “meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear reactors” (121) endangered seafloor ecosystems (210). Furthermore, Oliver explains how “[t]the release of subduction caused the landmass near the epicenter to jump about thirteen feet in our direction” (215). Therefore, the “battered coast of Japan” (32) is now even nearer to Canada than it was before the quake. As a result, Oliver bitterly concludes that “[n]o place is safe” (215) from geological hazards. The earthquake’s aftermath was so severe that it even caused “the planet’s mass to shift closer to the core, which made the earth spin faster. The increase in the speed of rotation shortened the length of the day. Our days are shorter now […] [of] one point eight millionth of a second a day” (216). While the change in time is almost imperceptible, this fact provokes wonder at the Earth’s processes and their ability to alter not only physical geography but also the very fabric of time.

Oliver’s remarks appear after a brief digression on Japanese folklore about earthquakes and tsunamis. However, the presence of both folk beliefs and scientific knowledge in the novel does not create a clash. The proximity of these two discourses reinforces the idea of geological phenomena as transformative forces capable of radically reshaping reality. As clearly explained by Fabio Rambelli, Japanese premodern culture and folk beliefs feature a series of beings apt to stress the concept of

nature “as a radical Other for human beings, in which incomprehensible and ultimately unstoppable forces are at work” (Rambelli 52). Originally, the Japanese bestiary associated with earthquakes came from Indic cultures, featuring an adaptation of entities such as the *nāga* and the gods Agni, Varuna, Indra and Garuda. However, from the 19th century onward, this mythological imagery, involving mighty deities, underwent a vernacularisation due to the attribution of similar powers to other creatures, such as the popular “earthquake-causing beast [that] came to take the more familiar shape of the catfish (*namazu*)” (63).

This creature is also mentioned in Ozeki’s novel, which offers a thorough account of the different ‘sub-species’ of this fish and its cultural meanings. According to the lore reported by Ozeki, the “*jishin namazu*, or Earthquake Catfish” (Ozeki 211) is an undersea creature shaped like a whale who “caused the earth to shake and tremble by his furious thrashing” (211). Another variety is the “*yonaoshi namazu*, or the World-Rectifying Catfish” (212), whose name highlights potential beneficial aspects of disasters, which were believed to “heal the political and economic corruption in the society” (212). The collateral damages of earthquakes are, instead, embodied by the “*seppuku namazu*, the Suicide Catfish” (2012), who kills itself “filled with remorse” (212) for having caused deaths and destruction. In this context, traditional Japanese culture reflects a complex and nuanced perception of geological phenomena as active agents, often characterised by violent, chaotic movements of the earth. This is exemplified by the image of thrashing and turbulence, embodied in the figure of the *namazu*, whose whale-like shape underscores the close link between earthquakes and tsunamis

This degree of geological awareness is still present in contemporary Japanese society under different forms. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, the character of Muji, a Buddhist monk living a temple on the Miyagi coast, which will be hit by the earthquake and tsunami, expresses her concerns for the temple’s safety. Nao writes in her diary how: “Muji says she wonders what’s even holding it [the temple] to the mountain. She worries about earthquakes and is afraid the buildings will just collapse and slide down into the gulch and wash out to sea” (190). Religious affiliations enact, however, other responses to the catastrophe. For instance, Ruth reads of how “[c]rackpot religious leaders were blaming the earthquake on angry gods who were punishing the Japanese for everything, from their materialism and worship of technology to their dependence on nuclear power and reckless slaughter of whales” (90). Nonetheless, Oliver also notes how Japan’s folkbeliefs are survived in a less superstitious manner. Indeed, the image of *Namazu* is still somehow helpful for the population, thanks to introduction of:

The Yure Kuru mobile phone app [that] warns users of a coming earthquake, providing information about the location of its epicentre, the arrival time, and the seismic intensity. Yure Kuru means “Shaking Coming,” and the app’s logo is a cartoon catfish with a goofy smile and two lightning bolts coming out of his head (212).

In conclusion, *A Tale for the Time Being* transforms the 2011 Tōhoku disaster from a narrative of pure devastation into an exploration of unexpected human connection across oceanic distances. Through the motive of tsunami debris carrying Nao's diary to Ruth's shore, Ozeki demonstrates how geological catastrophes can paradoxically forge bonds between disparate lives. The novel's integration of traditional earthquake folklore with contemporary digital anxiety reveals the persistent human need to comprehend natural disasters through both ancient wisdom and modern technology. While Ruth's obsessive search through digital archives ultimately yields no definitive answers about Nao's fate, this uncertainty reflects the broader epistemological limitations of understanding catastrophic events. Ozeki's work thus suggests that literature's value lies not in providing closure but in creating spaces for transpacific empathy and shared vulnerability, transforming disaster debris into agents of narrative connection that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

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