

A Crucial Collaboration: Reader-Writer-Character-Book

by Ruth Ozeki

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A writer wakes up one morning and hears a voice. It's the high clear voice of a young girl—a schoolgirl, a Japanese schoolgirl. "Hi!" she says. "My name is Nao, and I'm a time being. Do you know what a time being is?"

This is, more or less, how my new novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, was born, but I imagine some variation of this scene happens every day to writers everywhere. A character speaks—whispers, mutters, shouts—breaking the silence and, in so doing, calls the writer into being. And the writer responds. He cocks his head and listens. She hauls herself off the barroom floor or pulls her truck over to the side of the road. He sneaks into the washroom during a break from his barista job. She pulls a napkin from her pocket and scribbles down the words before they are lost. At least, this is what happens if the writer is paying attention. If she is not too busy answering e-mail, or surfing the web, or watching *Game of Thrones*.

So far, so good. The writer writes her book. It takes him a year, two years, six years, or ten. She struggles with her characters. He puts himself in his book, takes herself out, puts himself back in again in a hundred different ways and guises. She loses herself in her fictional world. He loses his faith and then finds it again. Eventually she finishes, and the book goes out into the world, where a reader finds it, picks it up, and reads:

"Hi! My name is Nao, and I'm a time being. Do you know what a time being is? Well, if you give me a moment, I will tell you."

And so it goes. Character calls forth writer. Writer calls forth reader. It seems straightforward—but is it? What are the relationships between these players, the relationships embedded in every novel or work of fiction?

Many people (nonwriters) imagine the novelist to be a lofty, godlike being who wields omniscient and absolute authority over his creations, manipulating characters like puppets and compelling them to enact his every whim, but nothing could be further from the truth. Writers are at the mercy of their creations, as I suspect all gods, ultimately, must be. And while it seems fanciful to think of a character as a preformed, preexisting entity, floating around in

some sort of primordial, Pirandellian soup, waiting for an unsuspecting writer to show up, that's often how it feels—like a literary mugging, or better yet, a hijacking. The character jumps on board and takes over the controls, and the writer—gratefully, abjectly, hopefully—hangs on for dear life.

But of course this is an exaggeration, too, and the truth lies somewhere in the middle. While characters sometimes have a disturbing amount of agency, the author has authority too, upon which, for *their* dear lives, the characters rely. The relationship between novelist and character is one of symbiosis and mutualism, and the book is the emergent field of their collaboration.

The relationship between the reader and the writer is similar. Again, the writer is usually thought to be the one in control of the reading experience, seducing readers with story and holding them in his thrall, but the reality is more complex and reciprocal. This relationship is symbiotic, too, and the book is a cocreation. As writers, we rely on our readers to finish our thoughts and our sentences. Every word I write can only be unlocked by the eye and mind of a reader. My scenes come to life because a reader is willing to animate them with his or her imagination and lived experience. Of course, logically, this means that every reader is reading a very different novel. The *Tale for the Time Being* that Reader A reads is very different from the *Tale for the Time Being* that Reader Q reads, and anyone who has ever been in a book club knows this to be true. There are as many books as there are readers, and writers know this and are grateful—or at least we ought to be—that there are still people in the world who love the written word enough to spend their precious days reading our books rather than answering e-mail, surfing the web, or watching *Game of Thrones*.

All meaning is created through relationship, which means all meaning is relative. There is no one, single, definitive book. There is no one, single, definitive author. And clearly there is no one, single, definitive reader, either. There is only the exchange, the meaning that you and I, in any given moment, make together, as your eyes scan these words and your mind makes sense of them. And because we are always changing, the words you read today mean something very different from those same words if read a month or a year from now. If you've ever gone back and reread a story you loved from childhood, you'll know this to be true as well. The story is different, created anew by your evolving memories of time and place—your childhood bedroom, the color of the walls, the quality of light, your father's or mother's voice reading aloud—as well as by the life you've lived in the years since you last encountered the text.

And while this is true for all written language, I think novels are special. I was exchanging e-mails about this subject with some novelist friends, and one of them, Karen Joy Fowler, commented that nonfiction is very good at giving us a look at history, at other times and lives, and it's thrilling how vast this territory is, but novels are vaster, because the novel gives us a look into someone else's mind. I agree with her. Novels are perhaps the most intimate means we humans have devised for knowing a stranger's mind. Why? Because novels require empathy, the subtle tracing of the movements of another's mind and heart, sustained over the many hours and days that reading requires. Dorothy Allison closed our e-mail exchange with the words "nothing is truer than fiction," and again, I agree. Fiction is true because it doesn't pretend to be true. Because it is so clearly and transparently relative. Because it changes over time, just like we do.

Reader, writer, character, book—these are not fixed identities we inhabit, once and for all. We are more plastic and malleable than that—time beings, if you will—and the lines that seem to separate us are not as distinct as they appear. We are more like a blur of one overlapping

another, a variable Venn diagram, or a polyphony of resonating tones. When our minds connect, our hearts open, and our tones start to resonate with the words on the page, the result is a collaboration, a cocreation, a book we cannot put down.

Ruth Ozeki is a novelist, filmmaker, Zen Buddhist priest, and the award-winning author of *My Year of Meats* (Viking, 1998) and *All Over Creation* (Viking, 2003). She is on the advisory editorial board of the *Asian American Literary Review* and a member of the creative advisory council of Hedgebrook, a women's writing retreat center on Whidbey Island, Washington. Her new novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, was published by Viking in March.

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