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Ozeki, Ruth. A Tale for the Time Being

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Ruth is a half-Japanese writer living with her husband on a remote island in the Pacific Northwest, struggling daily with both the isolation and with writer's block as she attempts to complete a memoir of her days caring for her Alzheimer's-striken late mother. Walking along the beach one day, she finds an odd collection of items tucked inside a lunch box and wrapped in several layers of plastic; among them are letters in French and Japanese, an antique watch, and the diary of a Japanese teenager named Nao. Nao was raised in America and transplanted to Japan after her father lost his job in a Silicon Valley start-up. Her father has now lost all will for life and is only waiting to achieve a beautiful suicide. Nao, meanwhile, is being bullied quite appallingly by her schoolmates and has decided that she, too, will commit suicide, but not until she has completed writing the biography of her 104-year-old great-grandmother, a Zen nun. As Ruth reads Nao's story, she slowly becomes obsessed with it, and with finding out what happened to Nao and how the diary and the other artifacts of her life wound up on her beach. Was Nao killed in the 2011 tsunami? Did she actually commit suicide? Did she throw these items into the ocean on purpose?

This is fascinating, carefully- and elegantly-structured, always engaging novel on the nature of time, story-telling, belief, life, Zen, and even quantum physics. A masterpiece of thoughtful, engaging literary fiction.

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