



**Ruth Ozeki:** “I never did find the typing lady's book, so I don't know what befell her or her protagonist. But this author's note is not really about their stories. It's about yours and mine, about how, when we read a story, we bring our own lives to bear on it and make it ours, no matter what the writer might have intended. Stories are like that. They are collaborations between people who read and people who type. They are how we co-create each other and dream ourselves into being.”

**James Shaheen:** Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Ruth Ozeki. Ruth is a novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest. She recently published her first short story collection, *The Typing Lady and Other Fictions*. In my conversation with Ruth, we talk about what drew her to the form of the short story, how the Buddhist teaching of not-self informs her writing, how the act of writing can cultivate empathy, and why she views stories as an act of co-creation. So here's my conversation with Ruth Ozeki.

---

**James Shaheen:** So I'm here with Ruth Ozeki, a novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest. Hi, Ruth. It's great to be here with you.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Hi, James, how are you? It's wonderful to be back.

**James Shaheen:** Great. So, Ruth, we're here to talk about your new book, *The Typing Lady: And Other Fictions*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Sure. Well, this is my first collection of short stories. Most people start their careers with short stories and then move on to greater things. I am diminishing, I think. I'm going in the opposite direction. But the truth is that I've been writing short fiction for years and have had stories published here and there in different journals and magazines, but I'd never really concentrated on the form. It was always something that I did in response to being asked to contribute, say, to an anthology. But I started teaching, and in creative writing classes, we focus



on short fiction, and I realized that if I was going to teach this form, I really ought to try to master it as well, or at least learn more about it. And so I started writing more of these short stories, and little by little I just really started to appreciate the form. I think that I tend to be quite verbose, and my novels are long, and I've certainly noticed my own attention span decreasing, and I certainly have noticed that in friends and my students as well. And I just thought it seemed like a timely thing to do, to try to really look at the way I write and see if there's a way of writing differently. You know, at this point in my career, it's thrilling to have a debut of anything. But it feels like the short story form is really something that's worth investigating, and I have to say I loved doing it.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah. You know, I find writing short a little bit more difficult. So how is the process different from your usual writing process, say, when you write a novel?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Sure, I agree. I find writing short challenging in different ways, I think, but also not easier exactly but more manageable in other ways. When I am writing a novel, I usually start with a character or a voice, some sense of a situation, and then I just kind of write into the void. I never know exactly where I'm going. I mean, it's often a multiyear process of not knowing, and that's exciting in some ways; it's also nerve-wracking in other ways. But I never really plan too far in advance. And so I think as a result, there's a more of a kind of an exploratory feeling to the writing process when I'm writing a novel.

When I'm writing a short story, I have a better sense of where I'm heading. I have a sense of the scope or the scale of the story, and so the writing tends to be more compressed, and I don't want to use the word economical because it's not quite that either. Just more direct. The other thing that I found about writing short stories is that I love the editorial process. I love having a draft finished. The first draft is always so difficult, but once I get a draft done and can start to refine, that's where I get excited and that's where it gets to be a lot of fun. And with short fiction, I think



the period of refinement, the amount of time that I spend on refinement, is kind of amplified. So that has been really, really interesting and enjoyable. I really like the genre.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I'll circle back to the genre a little bit later because there is a short story that alludes to it, which I'll get to. But for now, the book takes its title from the character in the first story, who also happens to be in your last book, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, which I interviewed you about. So can you tell us a bit about the figure of the typing lady?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Sure. So in *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, the typing lady is a minor character. She sits in a carrel in the library where the protagonist Benny hangs out. She's just somebody that Benny notices. She's always there. She always has her laptop and a big stack of books around her, and she's always typing. That's what she does: She observes what's going on around her, and she types. In the book she's referred to as the typing lady. She's in her 60s, looks vaguely Asian, has kind of gray-streaked hair, black-rimmed glasses. Astute readers have picked up on the fact that she resembles me, and of course this isn't accidental. The typing lady is watching the characters, she's watching what's going on, she's recording their movements, and she's trying very hard not to interfere in their lives. And that is pretty much a description of what I do as the writer who is writing this book. I'm doing the exact same thing: I'm watching the characters, observing their quirks, writing down what they do, and trying very hard not to interfere too much with their own volition. So the sort of quasi-autobiographical nature of that character has always amused me. I suppose it's a little bit like Hitchcock appearing in his films.

And so when I started writing the collection, I'm not sure exactly where the idea came from, but in any case, I thought it would be fun to write a story about her. So all of the stories in the collection are written by this semi-autobiographical figure called the typing lady. And so, anyway, that was where the title came from.

*Tricycle Talks*

“Writing into the Void”

Episode #149 with Ruth Ozeki

May 27, 2026



**James Shaheen:** It's funny, when I read *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, I remember thinking, “Who is that typing lady?” Well, now I know.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yes, exactly.

**James Shaheen:** That's very nice. So there's a doubling that's happening here, where the typing lady shares many characteristics with you, as you pointed out. In fact, there's a funny moment when the narrator of the first story asks a librarian if she's seen the typing lady, and the librarian looks at her with some confusion, like she's just described herself. So can you say more about this doubling effect?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Sure. So there's this wonderful French term from theater and literature and painting called the *mise en abyme*, which means to be placed in abyss, and it's that effect in a painting or in a story of a painting that contains identical, smaller replicas of itself. So it's this kind of infinitely recursive repeating structure that you sort of fall into, and you never know where it ends. And I don't know whether you remember the Droste Cocoa box. There was a box of Dutch cocoa.

**James Shaheen:** Oh right. Yeah.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Right. And it had a picture of a Dutch woman holding a tray with a box of Droste Cocoa on it, which had a picture of a Dutch woman with a tray, which, you know—

**James Shaheen:** Right, right. Infinite mirror.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Infinite regression. Exactly. I think the Morton Salt box used to have a similar thing, a girl carrying a box of Morton Salt, carrying a box, and so on. And when I was a child, this just confounded and fascinated me. There was something about this that I just found unfathomable and terribly mysterious. And I think I've just always been attracted to that as a structure, and so that's certainly what's happening in the title story of this collection.



**James Shaheen:** Well, riffing on that infinite regression, in an almost Borges-like turn, the typing ladies keep proliferating, as there's the typing lady as narrator, as author, and then as protagonist. So can you talk about this multiplicity and how you're playing with the slipperiness of identity here?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah, sure. I mean, in Buddhism we talk about no-self or not-self, and this is a teaching that has always made a lot of intuitive sense to me. I think there are probably many reasons I could cite for that. I certainly think that being biracial has something to do with it. You know, my mother is Japanese, my father's Caucasian American, and growing up, I never really understood which I was because I wasn't either. I wasn't one or the other, and I always saw the world through these different points of view. So writing from a singular point of view never really made a lot of sense to me.

I think in all of my books, in fact, I write from multiple points of view. I've never managed to master the omniscient third-person sort of godlike narrator of the truly great classical novels. And I always felt that to be kind of a deficiency on my part, that there was a problem. But then once I started practicing Buddhism and really fully embraced my nontheistic self, then I was able to let go of that a little bit. But this idea of no-self or not-self, of self emerging in relationship to other, is something that, again, as I said, makes a kind of intuitive sense to me. And when I am writing, I feel like all of my fictional characters are in some way or another aspects of this thing that I call “me,” this thing that I experience as self. And so there is no one fixed abiding self; there are only these reflections that show up depending on whatever situation arises in the moment, be that a fictional situation or a real situation. Or maybe there's no difference between a fictional and a real situation.

**James Shaheen:** Well, that comes through too, and maybe that explains why there are so many Ruths. You've featured protagonists named Ruth who are writers and who have a partner named Oliver, as you do. It is and it isn't you, so maybe that speaks to the fluidity of self. Can you talk a



bit about the relationship between Ruth the author and the various Ruths as characters? I know it's something you said you initially rebelled against.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah, I've never been a big fan of autobiographical fiction or autofiction because I've always felt it was a little bit too limiting in a way. But, you know, clearly what I'm doing is something adjacent to autofiction.

When I first started writing—well, I should actually back up a little bit. As a child, when I was reading novels, I was very often reading novels that were written by men. They were written by British men. That was in my mind what I thought a novel should be. The proliferation of fiction by people of color didn't really happen until the seventies and eighties. And so when I was a child and really wanted to be a novelist, I really bought into this, you know, the kind of character who was a protagonist in these classical novels. But it just never really made any sense to me.

And so finally when I started to write fiction myself, I started to try to use characters who were mixed race like I am, and I realized I had a problem that writers who conformed to a more kind of archetypal identity didn't have. If a white man writes a novel about a white man, you don't automatically assume that the character is modeled on the author's life or that the character is autobiographical. If you write a character who's half Japanese, then readers will make that assumption. They'll make the assumption that it's an autobiographical character. So the separation between fiction and fact and reality starts to get blurry.

I realized early on that this was something that I was going to have to contend with if I wanted to write characters whose lives in some way reflected my own lived experience. And so I started to play with it. In *My Year of Meats*, there's a mixed-race character who shares a cultural, racial, cultural background and also a job description, and I ended up making her six feet tall, and I gave her green hair so that readers could tell us apart. That was the first way that I dealt with this. In the second novel, *All Over Creation*, I made the mixed-race protagonist so dysfunctional that I figured readers wouldn't dare ask me if it was an autobiographical character. And that didn't



really work either. So then in the third novel, I ended up just giving up and naming the character Ruth and playing with the reader's assumptions in that way, and I think each of these served the novel that I was working on in one way or another. So this is the way that I've always, right from the beginning and almost not by choice, played with the intersection of fiction and “reality.”

**James Shaheen:** You know, you're talking about creating these characters, but in the title story, the typing lady begins acquiring typewriters, and this takes a bit of a surreal turn and eventually the typewriters begin to take on voices of their own, shuffling elements of her work and creating entirely new stories and worlds. You know, I can't help but think of your last book, where the protagonist Benny begins hearing the voices of inanimate objects around him. So can you tell us about the typewriters developing their own voices and personalities and these characters sort of become animated and take on a life of their own?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Sure. Well, I should also mention that here too, this typing lady, I mean, we've mentioned this, is another kind of semi-autobiographical character. In the story, the typing lady is driving back from a lecture she gives at Harvard and passes a typewriter store and sees it and pulls over and goes in and emerges three hours later with an old 1956 Royal typewriter. And then the following week she's in New York and she picks up a second typewriter at Gramercy Typewriter Company, and then the third one she buys on eBay, and et cetera, et cetera. This is actually something that very much did happen to me. And I realized that now that I was acquiring these typewriters, I really needed to put them into the stories so that I could claim them as a business deduction on my taxes, and so really that's where this whole collection came from.

But to get back to this idea of the typewriter as an object, they're these very sturdy, intricate, mechanical objects, tools that serve us in sort of wonderful ways. And they're durable. I mean, we go through computers. How many computers have you gone through? But typewriters outlast us. So typewriters have belonged to others before they actually get to us. And so the typewriters themselves have had a whole range of experiences and written all sorts of different things that we don't know about when we acquire them, because nobody's making new typewriters these days,



so all of our typewriters come with histories, right? And so that sense of objects having lives of their own—not only lives but lives and opinions of their own—was something I very much was playing with in *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. And that really, I think, was very much influenced by a lot of things, but the animist traditions in Japanese Shinto religion, for example. I mean, you can see that in Marie Kondo, right? This idea that your socks have histories and that they've served you, and so that you should feel a certain amount of gratitude to them before you throw them out. And so this is something that I think is quite beautiful, and certainly with typewriters, the idea that you could form that kind of intimate relationship with a machine so that the machine would eventually come to know you. I mean, we're seeing that playing out with AI right now, except it's happening in this large language model algorithmic world, but with a typewriter, you know, imagine if a typewriter could do that. And so I guess that's what I was really thinking about. I was using these old machines to kind of enact a very recent modern phenomenon.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I have this typewriter from the sixties with the box that it came in. Remember they were like little suitcases and you carried them around? I was too young, but I got it from my family. You know, I also wanted to just say about the typing lady, I wanted to know who she was in *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, and then I kind of felt like, well now I know who she is, and yet she's so elusive. I realize I know her as well, or not as anybody, which really comes through. But I also think of Dogen's notion of insentient beings preaching the dharma and the emphasis on listening to nonhuman forms.

**Ruth Ozeki:** That's right. And that's certainly, when I was working on *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, that was a central teaching that I was working with during that writing. With the book before, *A Tale for the Time Being*, I was working with Dogen's fascicles “Uji” and “Genjokoan.” Those were the two primary fascicles. And then for *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, yes, I was working on insentient beings speaking the dharma, or preaching the dharma.



**James Shaheen:** Right. You also address how stories take on new lives with each reading, and I wonder if you'd be willing to read the last paragraph of the author's note, which is itself a short story, to get at this theme.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Sure. Let's see now. Yes. So the author here is reading the typing lady's collection of short fiction, which is called *The Typing Lady*. And so the last paragraph goes like this.

“I never did find the typing lady's book, so I don't know what befell her or her protagonist. But this author's note is not really about their stories. It's about yours and mine, about how, when we read a story, we bring our own lives to bear on it and make it ours, no matter what the writer might have intended. Stories are like that. They are collaborations between people who read and people who type. They are how we co-create each other and dream ourselves into being.”

**James Shaheen:** That's so nice. So tell us about this. How do you think about stories as collaborations and co-creations? And how do we dream ourselves into being?

**Ruth Ozeki:** I think that language is a slippery thing, as we know, and as the Zen masters have been very careful to point out over the centuries. We think that we are saying one thing, or in my case, I feel like I'm writing one story, and I'm fairly convinced that I know what that story is, and I write it and I send it out into the world, and I assume that readers are going to read the story that I wrote. But that's actually not the case. I think, as anyone who's ever taught realizes, you think you're teaching one thing, you think you're saying one thing, and it's being received in multiple different ways. It's being received differently by every person who receives it. So when I write a novel or a story and I send it out into the world, I think that my readers are reading one thing, but they're reading something that's completely different than what I think I wrote. And the reason, of course, is that they're bringing their own life experience to the page. And so what they're reading is actually something that that reader and I co-created, and it's entirely unique and it's entirely original, and it's different from anything that any other reader reads.



And that's really why I think fiction works. That's why stories work, because it engages readers in this kind of co-creative process. And I remember in *A Tale for the Time Being*, I was playing around with quantum theory, and I started to really think of books as a kind of metaphor for the idea of a quantum array, that material can exist, I mean, light, for example, can exist as a single particle, or it can exist as an array. In fact, both, it's not an either/or. It's both/and. And that's kind of the way I think about books, that yes, there is this singular object called *The Typing Lady*. And it's a book. But also once it goes out into the world and it's picked up and read by many readers, there will be as many versions of *The Typing Lady* as there are readers who pick it up and read it. And I find that to be really exciting, the idea that I'm engaged in this creative process with a bunch of collaborators who I don't know, but hopefully they'll be out there and they'll be working on this.

**James Shaheen:** You know, sometimes I hear people saying, “Am I reading into this, or is she saying that?” But of course, you're reading into it.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Of course you're reading into it.

**James Shaheen:** What else can you do? And I wonder if sometimes you hear somebody's version of one of your own stories and think, “Hey, that makes sense.”

**Ruth Ozeki:** I do, all the time. In fact, readers are constantly telling me things, showing me things that I've done that I was completely unconscious of, effects that I've apparently created or symbolism that apparently I've used, and they're probably right. I mean, I probably did do something that leads to that effect. But I did it unconsciously, and it didn't really occur to me until they told me.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, it starts to make more and more sense that we dream ourselves into being, and this is a co-creation.



**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah.

**James Shaheen:** One thread that runs through some of the stories is the question of what it truly means to be compassionate, and in one story, aptly titled “Feelings,” a school teacher gives her class an assignment to do one compassionate act and write about it. So of course, the students get caught up in various forms of false or performative compassion. But I wonder how you think about compassion in relation to the acts of reading and writing. Do you think about writing or the act of inhabiting different characters’ voices and perspectives as an act of compassion or empathy?

**Ruth Ozeki:** That's a great question. I would certainly say empathy. Well, yeah, I mean, is there a point in making a distinction here? I'm not so sure. When I'm writing a fictional character, what I'm trying to do is to inhabit the body-mind of that character and see and understand and feel the world from that character's perspective. So that's to me the imaginative challenge. The way I do it is a kind of embodied practice in the same way that when I meditate, it's an embodied practice. I mean, I'm very conscious of the position of my body sitting down and in particular opening the sense gates, the five sense gates of the body and the sense gate of the mind, and opening those and then just sitting there, sitting and sort of experiencing the world coming in and going out. And I do something similar when I write. You know, I'll know the situation that my character is in and I'll close my eyes and try to cast myself into the body-mind of that character in very much the same way, opening the sense gates and then looking around, or listening or tasting and just sensing the world that the character is in.

And this is a process of discovery because very often I won't know a lot about the situation that the character is in until I do an exercise like this. And then I start to hear things, I start to notice what's going on outside the room that the character is in, or I start to notice details about the room or the location, really getting a sense of the interior life but also the surroundings of the



character. And I suppose, you know, is that empathy? I don't know. Is that empathy? I guess that's my question. It's something that is a precursor to empathy perhaps.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I think at the other end, the reader of fiction can also develop a capacity or cultivate or an empathy. I mean, I think the reader reads and sometimes experiences empathy, and I'm just wondering on the creator's side whether it's the same.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. I guess here's the difference: When I do this, it's exploratory. I'm not going in with the intention, and I say going in, but I'm literally trying to go into the body-mind of the character. So I'm not going in with any kind of sense that I want to feel compassion toward this character or I want the reader to feel compassion toward this character; rather, it's an exploratory type of investigation.

But I think that that's what writers want to do. We talk about characters being relatable, but it's true. We can make fun of that, but at the same time, it's true, we do want to invite the reader into the body-mind and experience of that character and then to experience the world through that character's perspective. And that's the pleasure of reading, I think.

And here's the other thing that I think is interesting is that we all have bodies, right? Readers have bodies, and writers have bodies. And that's the kind of common ground that, if you can express this in the right way, if you can sort of create it in the right way on the page, you're inviting the reader into that. And that's why the reader understands it, because we have this overlapping, interconnected, interdependent relationship with each other.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I am going to get to the story “One Art” in a moment, but in reference to that, the young woman in that couldn't have been more different from me, and yet I completely identified and felt empathy for her. And she's very different from me.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Lovely. That makes me really happy.



**James Shaheen:** Yeah, but in a rather poignant moment at the end of the story “Feelings,” we’ll get to “One Art,” the narrator looks back and determines that her failure wasn’t a failure of compassion so much as a failure of imagination. So I’m curious how you think about the relationship between compassion and imagination.

**Ruth Ozeki:** You know, I just described the ways that I engage with my imagination, or maybe not with my imagination but the ways that I engage my imagination, a kind of exercise that I do in order to open up the imagination and to allow possibility in. I’m not doing it with a kind of intent to be compassionate, but of course, the flip side of that is that it becomes increasingly difficult, for me anyway, it’s become increasingly difficult the older I get to allow bad things to happen to my characters, so clearly I am feeling an enormous amount of compassion for them.

But I think that the more that we can use our imaginations, depending on how you want to define that term, the more we can open to the possibilities that exist for another, the more compassionate we will become. Many writers have really thought this and have talked about this more articulately than I am, about how fiction in particular is a way of cultivating compassion, that fiction requires the reader to engage in this act of imagination and compassion. Or maybe it’s first imagination, and then from that grows compassion. Something like that. And I think that’s what the character in that particular story “Feelings” is engaged with, you know, that they’re approaching compassion from a kind of top-down perspective. You know, the teacher kind of introduces the notion of compassion and then demands that her students feel that or find a way to evoke that. And that is kind of backwards from the way that it works.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, well, that’s interesting. I mean, I feel almost now like I was pushing empathy and compassion onto you when you’re basically saying it’s not a top-down thing. It’s maybe cultivated through the practice of writing itself.

**Ruth Ozeki:** I think that’s true. I think it’s cultivated through the practice of writing. I think it’s cultivated through the practice of that kind of deeper reflection. I mean, I think that in Buddhism,



of course, we're often taught compassion, and we're taught in a way that's a kind of top-down teaching. But on the other hand, we're also doing these various meditative practices that are meant to counter that, that it's a way of cultivating compassion from the ground up.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah. The interesting thing is when you do those practices, say the *brahmaviharas* or any of them to cultivate, say, compassion, empathy, kindness, and so forth, friendship, while you're doing that practice, often it feels fallow. Nothing's happening, but all of a sudden I'll be standing on the subway platform and that compassion or kindness or friendship will arise. So it's incidental, almost.

**Ruth Ozeki:** But that's so beautiful, and I think that's where these practices, again, you could call it compassion, but you can also call it imagination, that you are on the subway and you see somebody and you are able to kind of imagine your way into their shoes, as it were, as the girls in the story say. You can imagine your way into their situation, and from that arises compassion and empathy.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I always find it unexpected, but it does result from the practice but in a very indirect and unexpected way. You know, I talked about “One Art” earlier, and if someone had told me it was a love story, maybe I would've skipped it, but it's a really special piece. I loved it. It's one of my favorites. But the story takes its title from Elizabeth Bishop's famous poem “One Art.” The poem circles around the theme of loss, which is a thread that runs throughout the book: loss of memory, relationships, loved ones, but also smaller incremental losses that accumulate day to day. So could you talk about the art of losing and why you chose to open the book in this way?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. Well, that's always been one of my favorite poems. I first encountered that poem when I was in college and was just struck at that point by how beautiful the language is. Later in life, when I was taking care of my parents and they were at the ends of their lives, that poem took on a completely different meaning. I think that over the years, one of the things that's



really stuck with me is how that poem becomes differently and more significant the older I get and the more I lose.

And so in that story, there's a bit of that story where the narrator receives a letterpress edition of that poem, and it gets put into a box in her basement and eventually eaten by silverfish. And so the art of losing itself, you know, this piece of paper with the poem on it, kind of disintegrates into a lacelike filigree of holes and words. And this was actually something that did happen. I had exactly that, a letterpress edition of the poem, which I put on my wall, not in a frame, on the island where I live in British Columbia some of the time. And the silverfish got to it, and that's exactly what happened. And it was so beautiful and so poignant that I just felt it had to be included in a story because loss happens in so many different ways. You know, it changes us, and I think in a way it makes us wiser and more beautiful. Of course, I come from a Japanese background, and impermanence, ephemerality, and loss are very much built into the traditional Japanese aesthetic values of wabi sabi or yugen, you know, this idea that impermanence is exactly what makes something even more beautiful, right? And so that aesthetic, I think, is just one that I've grown up with and really appreciate.

**James Shaheen:** It's funny, I have to say, while I was enjoying the beauty of the silverfish-eaten letterpress copy, at the same time I was thinking, “Oh no, it's such a valuable item.” You know, it's funny, and it was beautiful at the same time.

**Ruth Ozeki:** If it makes you feel any better, I rescued it from the wall, and I now have it properly framed between two pieces of glass.

**James Shaheen:** Oh, good. Good.

**Ruth Ozeki:** The silverfish can't feast on it anymore.

**James Shaheen:** Oh, good. So I get to have my cake and eat it too.



**Ruth Ozeki:** You get to have both. Exactly.

**James Shaheen:** So I was particularly struck by the recurring theme of memory and forgetting, where a number of the narrators are trying to reconstruct their memories of what happened, sometimes from fragments or long-forgotten files in the basement, as in that one story, often with an acknowledgement of what's been lost to time and can't be recovered. So can you tell us about that choice?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah, this is something that I think I've always, from early days, been interested in this idea, the intersection between history, memory, and the imagination, and the way they overlap and the way they impact each other. And again, I think this is, you know, who knows why I'm interested in this. I suspect that, again, it has something to do with being bicultural, biracial, being the child of an immigrant, as so many of us are in this country, that history is sort of like that Elizabeth Bishop poem eaten by silverfish. You know, it starts to develop holes in it, and it starts to get eaten away by various other factors. And so what do we do? How do we fill in the gaps? And of course that's where imagination comes in.

So I think that's one kind of context within which I understand this. Another one is that my mother had Alzheimer's, and so taking care of her was watching history and memory just start to erode. And it was a very painful process, but there was also something kind of beautiful about it in the sense that, I mean, I was very lucky that my mother never fought her condition. She accepted it with an enormous amount of humor and sort of stoic grace and would comment on it and include me in it, and very often she would pretend to forget something when she hadn't just in order to kind of tease me or make me laugh. I mean, her way of dealing with her condition was really admirable. And so I think I learned a lot about acceptance, that this was what was happening and she accepted it and she helped me accept it too. And I think that's a lesson that the more years that pass and as I get older and older, that particular lesson from my mom was probably one of the most precious lessons I've ever received.



**James Shaheen:** You know, it's funny. I mean, memory of course goes. It leaves all of us eventually. But I wonder, when we do have our faculties, and we do remember, maybe not as sharply as we did when we were 20. Names can elude us more often.

**Ruth Ozeki:** I don't even remember. It was so long ago that I don't remember what my memory was like when I was 20.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, exactly. I do remember how quickly I would learn languages and how that's changed. But I wonder, is it memory that changes or our understanding of it, or both? Because you do talk about this. A story I'll tell about an event or even about myself will be very different five years from now. In a sense it's that memory is unreliable; in another sense, it's that how we see it changes so radically. Of course, like everything but plastic, as you point out, memory itself disappears. But in the meanwhile something else is going on in this play between memory's unreliability and our understanding of our own lives or the things around us and the events. I mean, I certainly view events in the world right now very differently from how I might've viewed it when I was 18. As complicated and difficult as it is, the 18-year-old me would've talked about it very differently and would've talked about his past very differently and so forth. So what about memory, its reliability, how it changes, and how really, in many ways, our understanding deepens, hopefully?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah. I mean, it's interesting. I feel like if I were a neuroscientist, I would have a certain way of answering this question, and now I'm kind of curious about it. It seems to me that much of what we think we remember in fact is quite unreliable, even if we are 20. I know that there have been many very interesting experiments that bear this out, that memory is, I think in my experience, memory is also very much shaped by the way that I'm describing it, in other words, by language, by the language that I use to recount it or even to remember it. So, you know, it's hard to kind of pinpoint how much of memory is “accurate” and how much of it is fabricated over time and changed over time by the context within which we hold it, within which we recount it, within which we remember it. And so at any given moment we are bringing our



lived experience to that moment, and we can only understand it within the context of our lived experience up to that point. But as our lived experience changes and grows and deepens or whatever language you want to use to apply to it, then of course the memory itself, the object of our inquiry there, the object of our memory is going to change as well.

I mean, I think that one of the things that I'm playing with in this collection is looking at the ways that memory changes over a lifetime. Many of the stories are told in retrospect as a protagonist is trying to recreate what actually happened, what really happened, as if that's even possible.

**James Shaheen:** Right. We come up with a narrative and thread events together as if they're coherent, but in fact they're not. You know, a neuroscientist asked me once, “What's your earliest memory?” And I remember in the laundry room my mom had me in this deep sink in a bath, and I must have been 2 or 3, and I remembered that. And she goes, “Do you really remember that?” And I said, “Yeah.” She goes, “Do you have a picture of it?” And I do, and that really shaped the memory. There was probably was no such memory. But if I tell the story, I say, “My mom used to do this and this,” and I and I patch together otherwise incoherent moments in time. It's very interesting.

So I also wanted to ask you about another story in the collection called “Where Ambition Goes to Die.” I really loved that one, and it also explores aging and memory. Sometimes age does what practice might fail to do. The waning ambition of age can bring with it a contentment we can long for but not find in our youth. So I find a waning ambition brings some contentment, and I can flatter myself and say it's practice, but I just think I'm getting older.

**Ruth Ozeki:** I agree. I agree. I agree. The older I get, the more I think, “Wait a minute, is this practice, or is this just old age?”

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, is there no choice but to surrender?

*Tricycle Talks*

“Writing into the Void”

Episode #149 with Ruth Ozeki

May 27, 2026



**Ruth Ozeki:** Exactly. What a relief, right?

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, exactly. I love that story. You know, maybe I downplay the power of practice, but sometimes age does the trick. Also, the woman in that particular story starts to write short, and she does it for sheer pleasure and she all of a sudden is just enjoying it. She's not writing and looking over her shoulder; she's just writing. And that's because her ambition has waned and she's content. I wonder, were you thinking of yourself there a little bit? Like, I just get to write now?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Of course. Yeah. But you know, like all of the protagonists who are vaguely autofictional, you know, I wrote that story originally under a deadline for the *New York Times*. And so it was a commissioned story for the *New York Times*, for *T* magazine, and I remember the original commission was to write a story that was place-based, and the place was the Pacific Northwest, this island, and to write a ghost story. And so that was my interpretation of it, that the characters' ambitions had turned into ghosts and were haunting them in various ways.

I remember that I had said that I would do this story and write a ghost story about this island, and I had no idea what I was going to write, and the deadline was approaching and I was just kicking myself for having promised to do this. And then I don't know what happened. I think that it was probably the pressure of that situation that led me to imagine a story about a protagonist who was in a very different situation from mine, who was just simply allowing her ambition to be published in the *New York Times*, for example, to just evaporate, to turn into a ghost and leave her in peace. And I think that's where that story came from. In a way, that protagonist is kind of like the opposite of what I was actually going through at the time.

**James Shaheen:** Let's call that character aspirational.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Exactly. That's right.



**James Shaheen:** Okay, so the final story in the collection, “The Problem of the Body,” concerns a writer who has just finished her new book and enlists her granddaughter in trying to figure out a plot to fake her death to get out of a book tour. So I have to wonder if this is autobiographical. It's only fair. Do you hate interviews and book tours as much as your character does?

**Ruth Ozeki:** No, I don't. But here's the thing. You know, I've talked about characters being facets of the self, and the self that is a writer would much prefer to just stay at home in her pajamas and never talk to anybody and just write. You know, that's her preferred mode of living. There's another aspect of this amalgamation I call “self” who actually quite enjoys going out on the road and talking to people and talking about writing. I think of that person, that self, as being kind of like the publicity arm of the body. There are the creatives, and then there are the publicity folks, or the teacher, because there's a part of me that really enjoys teaching. And what's always hardest is shifting, making the transition from one self to another self, for the writer to relinquish control of the body to allow the author to step forward and do interviews and go on tour. That's a difficult transition for me, and so it's one that I struggle with.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah. My version of that is I got MLB.TV, and I watch baseball games, and I think I could just sit here until October. And then the transition of getting up and going to do work is a difficult one.

**Ruth Ozeki:** I know, I know, I know. I don't watch baseball, but I have in the last couple of years gotten completely into watching Japanese sumo. Now, thank goodness they have five different tournaments a year, so I never have to go too long in between tournaments. But it's the same kind of thing.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, with 162 baseball games, it's kind of hard, but I do pull myself out of it, although I will watch this evening. So, Ruth, this may be or sound like a trick question since

*Tricycle Talks*

“Writing into the Void”

Episode #149 with Ruth Ozeki

May 27, 2026



when the titular typing lady is asked what she's writing now, she laughs and says emails. But what are you writing now, and what's next for you?

**Ruth Ozeki:** Yeah, I am writing a lot of emails. That's always the case. But I am also working on another novel. And so that's something that the writer in me is desperately trying to find time to, to work on. I don't want to say too much about it because I never know really where the thing is going to go, where it's going to take me, but it's related to the world of *A Tale for the Time Being*. I'll just say that. So I'm kind of revisiting that world and those kinds of histories.

**James Shaheen:** Great. I'll look forward to it. So, Ruth, anything else before we close?

**Ruth Ozeki:** No, I think we covered everything.

**James Shaheen:** I think we covered a lot. I mean, for the stories we didn't discuss, the reader's just going to have to pick up a copy. So Ruth Ozeki, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Typing Lady*, available now. Thanks, Ruth.

**Ruth Ozeki:** Thanks so much, James. Take care.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Ruth Ozeki. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate). We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!