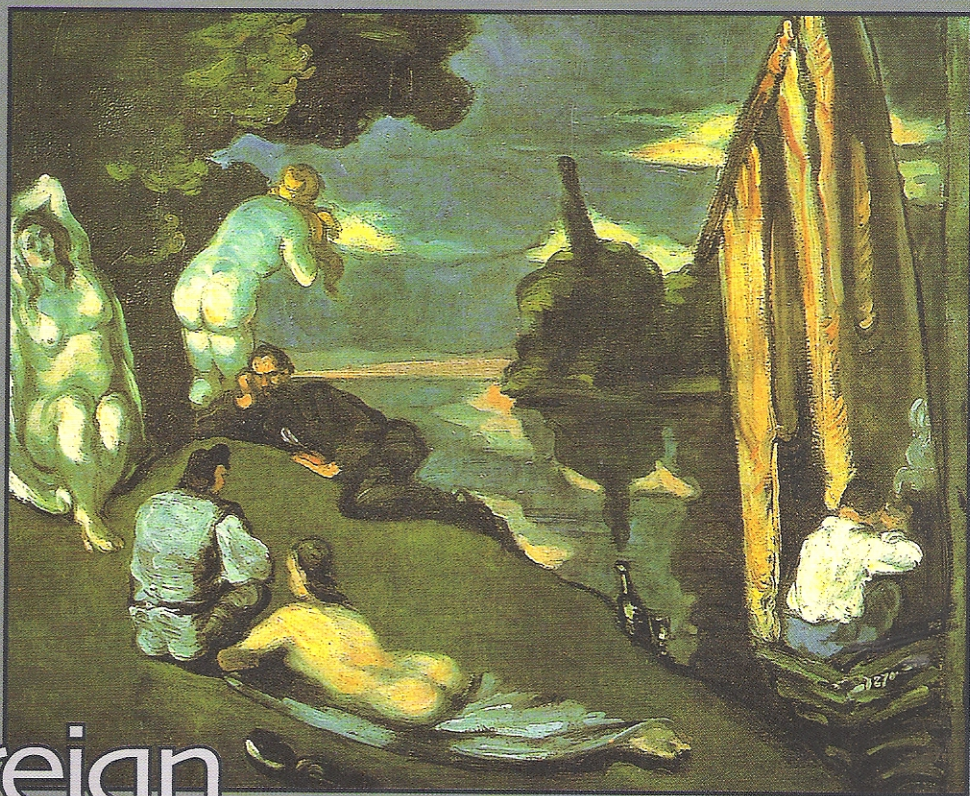


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From Meat to Potatoes: An Interview with Ruth Ozeki

Simon C. Estok

Abstract: “From meat to potatoes” documents Ruth Ozeki’s growth into the award-winning author she has become, from her childhood reading classic literary works in New Haven, to her early years as a film-maker in New York, and until the present as a best-selling novelist. The interview covers Ozeki’s views on topics such as racism, the environmental crisis, political activism, questions about reproduction, and the artistic process. Among the many things Ozeki discusses are the challenges she faced in producing her two novels, and answers questions about the challenges that her novels offer. Both of her novels offer substantial challenges to readers. For instance, the notion that authenticity is possible in the 21st century is one of the main challenges of Ozeki’s novels, and she explores various notions about hybridity in each, whether it is the hybridity of Jane Tagaki-Little and her mixed heritage in *My Year of Meats* or the hybridity of transgenic crops in *All Over Creation*. Also, it is very clear that Ozeki’s novels herald an exciting new direction that the genre of the novel itself is taking toward lessening the sense of opposition between science and fiction, toward the blurring of those boundaries. Ozeki’s use of footnotes and a bibliography in *My Year of Meats* places her work both in the world of fiction and in the world of fact so that (like the themes she follows) her own use of the novel genre itself becomes something of a hybrid. Transcribed here is the edited version of part of that interview held on June 5, 2009, at Canada’s University of Victoria.

Key words: Ruth Ozeki writing process literature of food environment race hybridity

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标题:从肉到土豆:鲁斯·尾关访谈

内容提要:“从肉到土豆”这一表述反映了鲁斯·尾关从一个在纽黑文阅读文学经典的儿童成长为一位纽约的电影制作人,再成长为当前的畅销小说作者和获奖作家的全过程。在本篇访谈中,她就种族主义、环境危机、政治激进主义、怀孕与堕胎、艺术过程等问题阐发了自己的观点,特别讨论了她在创作她的两部小说过程中面临的困境,回答了她在小说中所提出的问题。这两部小说向读者提出了一些实质性的问题,如21世纪的真实性和混杂性的问题(例如,《食肉之年》中简·小田垣及其杂糅的文化传统、《天下苍生》中的转基因农作物

等)。同时,她的小说还预示了一个新方向,即小说题材本身正在导致科学与虚构之间对抗性的弱化,导致两者疆界的模糊。尾关在《食肉之年》中使用尾注和文献索引将她的作品同时置于虚构世界和真实世界,从而其小说理念也具有了混杂性。本篇是笔者在 2009 年 6 月 5 日在加拿大维多利亚大学对尾关进行访谈的一部分,发表时做了适当编辑。

关键词: 鲁斯·尾关 写作过程 食物文学 环境 种族 混杂性

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An award winning novelist and film-maker, Ruth Ozeki was born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut to an American father (famed Yale University anthropologist Floyd Lounsbury) and a Japanese mother. Ozeki studied English and Asian Studies at Smith College and after graduating received a fellowship from the Japanese Ministry of Education to conduct graduate work in classical Japanese literature at Nara University. Upon her return to the United States, Ozeki became involved in the film industry, modestly, first as an art director, designing sets and props for low budget horror movies, before advancing to produce her own films.

The films for which she is best known are *Body of Correspondence* (1994) and *Halving the Bones* (1995). *Body of Correspondence* won the New Visions Award at the San Francisco Film Festival and was aired on PBS (the Public Broadcasting Service). *Halving the Bones* (1995), also an award-winner, is an autobiographical film that tells the story of Ozeki's experiences bringing her grandmother's remains home from Japan. It was screened at the Sundance Film Festival, among other places.

Ozeki's two novels are *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003). In profoundly complex—sometimes surprising—and deeply fundamental ways, Ozeki's debut novel challenges valorized notions of growth. The most obvious critique, of course, comes in the form of an assessment of diethylstilbestrol (DES), a growth hormone (discussed below). This novel is a breath of fresh opportunities, challenges, and complications for the growing field of ecocriticism, and it raises troubling implications about relationships between meat and nation. Ozeki's second novel—*All Over Creation*—is about the big scale power and small scale relations, power in both technology and multi-national agribusiness, and the novel shows the trickle-down effects of this power to very personal levels. Again, a challenge to ecocriticism, this book complicates the intersections between food and family, on the one hand, and science and corporate greed on the other. In this novel, Ozeki makes a thematic move from meat to potatoes but also an environmental shift of focus from DES to genetically modified (GM) foods.

The following is the edited transcript of an interview held on June 5, 2009 at Canada's University of Victoria at the Eighth Biennial conference of the *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* (ASLE), held in Victoria, BC, where Ozeki was invited to be one of the plenary speakers. The initials "SE" and "RO" are used below to abbreviate the interviewer (Simon Estok) and interviewee (Ruth Ozeki) respectively.

Ozeki's early years

SE: You've said that when you were a child, you wanted to be a novelist. Why did you want to be a novelist?

RO: Well, as soon as I started reading novels, I realized that that was what I wanted to do. When I was still in grade school, I was reading *Jane Eyre*, and I think that's probably when I decided that I wanted to be a novelist, and it was just because I loved the stories, I loved getting involved in a big story. There was nothing better than getting involved in a big fat book that I knew I could stick with for a really long time. And, so I think that it was just that: wanting to live inside stories like that.

SE: So, what novels actually *did it* for you?

RO: What I was reading when I was a little kid were things like *A Wrinkle in Time* (that was a very important book for me), *Harriet the Spy*. . . of course, *Harriet the Spy* was such a great role model for any little child. But I think I was probably reading the real novels—*Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*—in fifth or sixth grade, and when I got to be about twelve or thirteen, I just read a lot. I was reading Norman Mailer, I was reading . . .

SE: This was in New Haven?

RO: In New Haven, yes. I remember I'd read Norman Mailer and Faulkner and Fitzgerald before the end of eighth grade. So, we were reading very adult literature at a very young age, I think, and I fell in love with Faulkner . . .

SE: Which Faulkner?

RO: *Light in August* was the one I just totally fell head over heels in love with. So I was reading that when I was thirteen or fourteen, and then all through high school—it was a boarding school—they really encouraged us. They took us very seriously, and they encouraged us to take ourselves very seriously. There was a very big literary scene going on in high school, and we really thought we were Virginia Wolf, and Sylvia Plath, and Fitzgerald, and all of these people . . .

SE: So, the detour into film, then: how did that happen? I mean, it's a big detour.

RO: Well, actually, it's not that big a detour—it's still story-telling. I wrote all the way through high school, and all the way through college. Then I ended up going to Japan and doing graduate work in Japan, and I was writing all the way through that—mostly short stories. I think I attempted a couple of novels, longer pieces, but nothing of any substance.

Then when I came back to New York, I got into the film business by mistake, really. I needed a job, and some friends of mine were working in the film business, and so I was hired onto the production of a film called "Matt Riker Mutant Hunt." I was hired as the story-board artist.

SE: As illustrator?

RO: Yes, illustrator—the person who works with the director to create the story-boards, to plan the shots and the angles and the focal lengths and all of that sort of thing. So, I was hired to do that, but it was a very low-budget picture. As things turned out, they ran out of time to do story-boards, and a week before production was to start, they realized "Oh God, we forgot to hire an art director!" And so they looked around the room and pointed at me and said "You! You do it." This is what I mean when I say "by accident." I sort of stumbled into this career as an art director and did numerous low budget horror films. Little by little I started getting out of the art department stuff and moving into documentary work for Japanese television. I started doing more directing, and from there it was just the next step to making my own films.

SE: Film-making: do you miss it?

RO: Yes!

SE: Do you ever see yourself going back to it?

RO: No. No, I probably won't. It's too cumbersome at this point. It's too hard, and it's too expensive, though it tempts me. What I miss is being in the editing room. I miss doing the photography. I love shooting.

SE: Why do you miss the editing room?

RO: Because editing is the most beautiful thing . . . editing is the heart of story-telling. It's just the most beautiful thing. It's so much fun. It's really where the artistry comes in—that, and the filming of it as well, but in the editing room is where it all comes alive.

SE: You've begun writing short stories now—I mean publishing short stories?

RO: A little bit, yes, but I don't do that much.

SE: There's an intriguing title of one that I want to ask you about, because I've not read it: "The Death of the Last White Male." Is it about chickens?

RO: It is about chickens. "The Death of the Last White Male" is an island story. It is about a couple that live on an island and they raise chickens. And the last white male chicken gets nailed by a hawk. It's this whole sort of slightly tongue-in-cheek meditation on the death of the last white male. It has something to do with avian flu. And it has something to do with a lot of stuff like that. The protagonist is a Chinese-Canadian. She was born in Hong Kong, and she moved to Canada and lives there with her Canadian husband—that's the ethnic mix, similar to the ethnic mix in my novels.

Writing novels

SE: So, from film to novels: how did you do it? You didn't have a portfolio, but you published in Penguin. Did you just walk in with a manuscript?

RO: There are a lot of different ways to answer this question. I had a manuscript, and I had a lot of friends who are in publishing. One thing I had learned in film and television is about marketing—I learned about how to pitch things, how to package things, how to get things into the world. I had been doing television for a long time, so it wasn't like I had never submitted anything. It wasn't like I was completely new to this process. Whether it is the publishing industry or the film and television industry, it is the same process—or, at least, very similar.

A very dear friend from Smith College—Carole DeSanti—is an editor at Viking. She and I had been in a writing group together. And she was familiar with my writing. We had been friends from way back. So, when I started writing *My Year of Meats*, I told her about it. At that point, she had told me right up front—there was never any question about this—that she had been burned several times publishing friends, and we had an agreement that everybody in the group would not ask favors of each other. So I started writing *My Year of Meats*, and, despite our agreement not to ask favors, I asked her if she would read fifty pages. She did, and she gave me a little bit of advice about it.

SE: How long did it take you to finish the manuscript?

RO: It took me about a year to write it and research it. So then I finished it, and I asked Carole what to do next, and she said "Next you need an agent." I thought about how to get an agent. I went to the library and I looked through any books that I thought had anything to do with my topic, or that had a tone that might be similar, or was in some way resonant with the kind of work that I was doing. I made a list of all of the agents who represented the books that I admired and that I thought were similar in some way to mine. I came up with a list of those, and I wrote query letters. Carole said "Tell me who you are interested in representing you, and if I know them, I'll put in a phone call for you." She hadn't read the manuscript at that point—she'd read the first fifty pages, and that was it. So, I told her that I wanted Molly Friedrich, because Molly Friedrich represents Jane Smiley, and Jane Smiley had written *Moo*, and she'd written *A Thousand Acres*, and I like those two books—the humor in *Moo* and the seriousness of the environmental stuff in *A Thousand Acres*. I thought that whoever's representing Jane Smiley really knows

what she's doing and will know how to do this. So it was Molly Friedrich, and I got back to Carole and I said "This woman Molly Friedrich seems good, and do you know anything about her?"

There was a long silence on the other end, and Carole said "Molly Friedrich is one of the best agents in the business." I think she was hoping that I would try someone else. Anyway, she did know Molly. She told me to write Molly a query letter and send it off, so I did. Carole, at some point, had been talking to Molly and said, "By the way, this friend of mine is going to be submitting a manuscript to you. Please take a look at it."

I submitted it to Molly on a Thursday, and then I went home to Connecticut for the weekend. My dad was sick at that point, and I was kind of taking care of him.

Some time over the weekend, Molly called me. She said "be in my office on Monday. I'm going to represent your book. I'm going to do you a favor; I'm not going to sell it until we meet, but I need you in my office on Monday because we need to sign a contract so that I can get going on this."

SE: Cool.

RO: And I said "Great, but I can't come in on Monday because I'm cooking dinner for my dad and his colleague." There was a long silence on the other end. I actually don't think that anyone had ever said "no" to Molly. . .

SE: Especially not for cooking dinner.

RO: And then there was a kind of sigh, and she asked "can you come on *Tuesday*?" And I said "Oh yea, I'll be there on Tuesday!" So I showed up on Tuesday, and by Wednesday she had sold it. In the meantime, she had contacted Carole and said "I know your policy, but would you please reconsider?" And she persuaded Carole to take it on, and Carole had by that time read the manuscript for the first time—I had made two copies and had given her a copy of it as well.

It took a while because Carole was really serious about this "not publishing," but we talked about it and we really wanted to work together because we are very good friends, and we had this history going back to Ann Jones' comparative lit class,^① sitting next to each other and engaging in this kind of work, and we really wanted to try to make it happen, and so we did. She published both books. And we're still friends. We're still very good friends.

SE: Is Molly still your agent?

RO: Yes, Molly is still my agent and Carole Desanti is still my editor. And we continue to have this great literary dialogue.

SE: You were forty when you published *My Year of Meats*?

RO: I printed out the final draft on March 11, the day before I turned forty-one, so I could honestly say that I had written my first novel by the time I was forty; but it was, as the Japanese say, ぎりぎり—you know, pushing it right to the last minute.

SE: While you were writing it, did you feel confident? There's a sense of confidence in the writing.

RO: I didn't really know what I was doing. It is interesting looking at it now because I realize that it is a work of great enthusiasm. I was very enthusiastic about what I was doing. I had been working in film for all of those years, and suddenly I was working in the realm of words. It was like walking off the roof of a building and discovering that I could fly. It was so unencumbered. Anything that I wanted to do, I could just say it and it would be done. It never needed to be translated into reality. And that felt like flying. In the film-making world, it is like walking through a swamp with chains on. Everything is so hard to do. It's like you've got to recreate everything that you want to express. To tell any story, you have to make it exist in reality. Writing is much more free. Words are light.

SE: Do you live with your characters?

RO: Yes, totally. So, writing felt so easy to me. The first part of the book is kind of a picaresque novel, you know like a road trip, a rollicking, kind of thing, with one damn thing after another, and then about half way through the book, it changes. Something changes. I remember this because I was writing a process journal at the time. It was right around the time when I discovered DES. But let me backtrack a bit.

I had a special relationship with the book. I was the production researcher at home, in the office, and Jane (the fictional character in the book) was the documentary director out in the field, and she would go out and do stuff in the field and then she'd hit a wall and need more information, need more research done and would contact me back at the office, the home office. She would tell me what needed to be done, and I'd go out and do the research and send it to her. She'd go out and get into more trouble and get back to me—so the research was on-going and was feeding at every juncture what was happening on the page, and at some point I discovered DES,^② and at that moment the pharmaceutical, the reproductive, the animal—all of this stuff came together, and I realized where the book was going, but that was half-way through. As I looked back on it in my process notes, I realized that I was writing a thriller, and suddenly—at that point—you see the book kind of take off. It's not a book that was planned in advance; it's a book that gathered momentum as it was rolling.

SE: This is not an Ozeki interview unless I ask you the question that everybody asks you: the move from meat to potatoes?

RO: Well, I felt, after writing *My Year of Meats*, that I hadn't been fair to the farmers, to John Dunn and his family. John Dunn senior in *My Year of Meats* and his son have a conversation about the economics of farming—it's just a couple of pages—and that seemed to me to be not enough, that the economics of modern farming is an interesting dilemma. So I wanted to give a greater voice to it, and I really wanted to explore it. I wanted to get to the question about what the economic pressures are that face American farmers—so that's really what inspired it. I wanted to write a story that was set on a farm, a story that would go into that sense of being caught between a rock and a hard place, in terms of farm loans and subsidies, in terms of pressure from the agriculture companies, in terms of consumerism, and all those kinds of things.

Writer and world

SE: I'm wondering how much of the author is in Jane and how much is in Yumi? I love Yummy—er, Yumi—Fuller! The name just wants to go into “yummy.”

RO: Yes, it does. I really think that when a novelist is writing a character—any character—to some extent the writer has to become that character. To some extent, that character is coming from you, the author—some part of you, somewhere. I don't think it's possible just to imagine a character out of thin air and write it without in some way knowing that character's psychology. And the only way you can know that character's psychology is if it, in some way, represents a part of you, which isn't to say that it's autobiographical, because it's not. With Jane, for example, there are certain autobiographical details that we share. We share a job description. We share an apartment. We share an ethnicity. We share an attitude. We share some ideas about things. Some of Jane's ideas about editing, for example, are certainly my ideas about editing.

SE: And what about Yumi?

RO: What was interesting about Jane is that she ended up kind of like my super-hero. She was my wishful thinking—if I had been smarter, and taller, and younger, and everything else, I would have been more like Jane. And people, of course, immediately assumed that Jane was

Ruth (because Jane and I share an ethnicity). Of course, that's not the case, but it's the problem of writing ethnically-specific characters, who are hybrid, who are identifiable in that way. People immediately make assumptions like that. However, if a white guy writes about a white guy, nobody's going to assume that it's an autobiographical character. So you're dealing with a specificity here that makes that kind of an identification seem almost inevitable. And I realized that, so when I started writing *All Over Creation*, I thought that, given the subject matter that I was writing about—you know, cloning and hybridized seeds and all of that—I definitely want to have a hybridized character in here, but this time I'm going to make her so unappealing that nobody will ever *dare* ask me if there was any autobiographic references here. . .

SE: And I did! [laughing]

RO: [laughing] Yes, and clearly I was wrong!

SE: [laughing] So are there autobiographic elements there?

RO: What Yumi and I share—we don't share a job description, I don't have three illegitimate children, I didn't grow up on a potato farm, and so on. What we share is much more tenuous. What we share is a time period. We grew up at the same time. We share that key thing, the attitude of the Sixties. I never ran away from home, but I *wanted* to. So, we share that kind of rebellious, edgy streak. The other thing we share is the death of a father. And that was huge.

SE: One of the things I like about your work is the ways that it is activist. Just one of your novels, I suspect, does more activist work than all of the work of all of activist ecocritical theorists, for instance, put together. I'm wondering how your work changes you personally. Are you, for instance, vegetarian?

RO: I'm not a vegetarian. I like meat. I try as hard as I can *not* to eat meat when I don't know the source. I don't eat much meat, but when I do, it is usually locally-produced and I know the people who produce it. Before I wrote *My Year of Meats*, I was kind of like Jane—I knew about the rainforest, I knew about feedlots, but I was too busy to make any kind of changes in my life. Writing that book changed all of that, and I suddenly had to look at these kinds decisions very, very differently and change my behaviors as a result. So, yes, writing has had a huge impact on my life.

SE: I read something a few years ago, a really nasty piece, that labeled your writing polemic, a diatribe, and so on. I'm setting up a bit of a false binary in this question, but what do you see as your main purpose when you are writing: to educate or to entertain?

RO: To entertain. Yes, it is a false binary, and education is never in my head. I don't write novels to educate. I don't think it works to do that. I write to educate insofar as the education is necessary for the plot to move forward. In other words, in the DES situation, it was necessary to have certain minimal amounts of information—in the same way that any industrial thriller works—you need to know a certain amount of the world in which these characters are living in order for the plot to move forward.

SE: But your work is really engaged politically and seems activist.

RO: But I don't think of myself as an activist. I think of myself as a novelist first. There is probably more of a consciousness in *All Over Creation*. But I was very careful to keep the kids in *All Over Creation*—you know, the Seeds of Resistance—from being lily white. They're not; they are as exploitative as the biotech companies. They don't have as much power, but they know how to manipulate the media and so on. Usually when I'm writing this stuff, I'm writing because I want to explore it.

Meat and potatoes

SE: How has your eating changed since *All Over Creation*?

RO: I try to eat organic as much as I can. I'm not fanatical about these things. I think it's important not to be, for me anyway. I try to do as little harm as possible, whatever that means. Making certain kinds of choices over certain kinds of other choices; it's the ratio of awareness to consumption—I try to have a high level of awareness and a low level of consumption, when it comes to meat or, well, whatever.

SE: I must say that whatever your purpose, your work functions as interventionist literature.

RO: Yes, I have to take your word for it when you say the novels are interventionist. I mean that's good, that's great, but the reason that I write is not to preach, not to educate, but, in part, because I need to know. I started *All Over Creation* in part because I was afraid, I was scared of biotech. The whole thing scared me and I wanted to learn more about it, and what better way to learn about it than to write about it?

My Year of Meats, as I said, was an accident. I didn't know anything about the meat industry. What I intended to write about was the relationship between corporate media and documentary reality. And I knew I needed a sponsor. I thought it could be tobacco, it could be milk, it could be meat, it could be beer. . . you know, what's interesting? Cigarettes aren't funny, you know? Meat is funny. There's something kind of fun about it—you know, you could do the cooking show—and so I chose it. It was a narrative choice. It wasn't a political choice.

SE: I enjoy reading you and Michael Pollan at the same time. Can you tell me about his influences on *All Over Creation*?

RO: I love him. He's great. I adore him. Michael and I have a symbiotic relationship. We feed each other. That guy is prolific, and he's good, and he's smart. I admire him so much. When I was getting ready to write *All Over Creation*, I was doing the research, and I knew I wanted to write about transgenic crops. I needed to choose a crop, and I was going through the various things that were being genetically modified at the time, and then I read "Playing God in the Garden"^③—the potato chapter from *Botany of Desire* that was published in *The New York Times*. And it's in the book. Eliot finds this article in *The New York Times*, and the fiction is lifting from reality.

When I read that article in *The New York Times*, then I knew: "This is it! I'm doing potatoes." And I immediately started looking in Rand McNally so that I could plot a way to get down to Idaho so that I could do some research. The whole book—*All Over Creation*—came out of that, that article. Then when I finished the manuscript, I realized that I had to contact this guy Michael Pollan.

Botany of Desire came out some time in that period, and Michael was starting to really get known, and I contacted him at that point, and I explained the situation. I told him "my fictional characters are referencing your article . . . here's a copy of the book." He got back to me immediately and said "I'm so glad you got in touch because I've been meaning to contact you." He said "I'm in the middle of reading *My Year of Meats* for the second time because I'm using it. I'm writing a piece about meat, about steers, and I'm wondering how the hell you managed to make it so funny?"

So we got into this email exchange because we had been cross-pollinating, and I was delighted. I was so honored that he was reading my stuff, and he was happy that I had read his. He has done more single-handedly to change the way people think about food than any other author I can think of. He is a brilliant thinker, such a good writer! *Omnivore's Dilemma* has got to be one of

my favorite books, ever.

SE: Were you surprised by the success of *My Year of Meats*?

RO: Oh yeah! Wouldn't you be? It's such a nutty book. I just had absolutely no idea that anybody, except for friends, would want to read something as strange as that. I mean I'd never heard of a book like this: how could it possibly gain an audience?

SE: So, where do you get your inspiration? To write, I mean. Do you have dry periods? What do you do, if you have them? How much of the day do you write? Anxieties? How do you deal with them? It's been five years since your last novel: do you feel anxious?

RO: I don't feel anxious. I *did*, but I don't anymore. After I finished *All Over Creation*, I kind of knew I wanted to take a break. I felt that the hype around this stuff was just too big. I was in a period of deep grieving. My parents had died. My mother had Alzheimer's, and it was a long and protracted illness. I just needed to take some time off, and I didn't want to write another book about food, necessarily. I knew that everybody wanted me to, and there was too much expectation around that, but mostly I just needed to take some time off to get my feet back on the ground and to understand what had happened. I'd lost two parents and published two books. And I'd kind of gotten the superstitious question into my head that because the publication of both books coincided almost exactly with the death of a parent, "is this causal?" [laughing awkwardly]

SE: I see your point.

RO: You know, who else am I going to lose now? I don't want to lose anyone else. I've got to stop publishing books. Of course, that's kind of a silly thing, a superstitious thing, and I didn't really believe it, but there was a feeling that was real around that whole thing. So I wanted to re-group after that. And the other thing that was happening simultaneously—and this is big—is that I started a very serious practice of Japanese Zen, and that just became more important than writing. I felt that I really needed to get a good grounding in my practice. Also, in 2005, I did lay ordination, and pretty much immediately after that, I realized that I wanted to ordain as a sōtō zen priest. And, so that's what I've been doing.

SE: So you are an ordained priest?

RO: Not yet. I'm going to ordain next June, 2010, if everything goes according to schedule.

Race

SE: Race is very central to your work. I'm wondering if you might say a few words about representations of Asians in Western media, generally. I'm reminded of an ad I saw a few years ago on a billboard in New Zealand for Renault Scenic, which had text claiming "Japanese cars all look the same." We're talking 1998, not 1950. Very blatantly racist.

RO: Yes, absolutely, absolutely.

SE: That Renault ad... well, there are a lot of things like that, and I wonder how much of it white people actually get. I think you might be in a different position to see this kind of thing, having feet in two worlds, being of mixed heritage, with all of the issues that that entails, both in how people perceive and respond to you and in how you respond to those kinds of things...

RO: Yes, I'll tell you where it really became an issue. We were trying to cast for *My Year of Meats*, which was adapted as a screenplay, and I did the adaptation, and there was always this question about who was going to play Jane. And there aren't any Asian actresses who really can do this. There still are very few Asian actors in the West—male or female—who are doing lead

roles.

SE: And those roles are still very much involved with stereotypes, martial arts, kung fu. . .

RO: Yes, and the women are generally sex-pots and the Lucy Liu types, and the men are kung fu guys, or they are geeks, you know, computer geeks. Those are the stereotypes, and they are still very much there. So, back to your question, what do I think about it? Well, it's unfortunate, but it's a fact. And one of the things I like about writing is that you can write against those facts.

SE: It's not just that, though, that I'm getting at. It's CNN and the news coverage. During the Beijing Olympics, there was a sudden spate of news matters—generally not good—of things that were happening in China: earthquakes, mine collapses, pollution, tainted toys, and so on. It all came very suspiciously before the Olympics, and the news media have been relatively quiet *since* the Olympics. I don't mean to ringing the bells of conspiracy theory or anything like that, but there seemed a very tangible anti-Asian trend in the media, followed by a post-Olympic discursive silence.

RO: You know, I don't think it's that. I think it's that in the period leading up to the Olympics, reporters were paying attention. Now they're not *paying attention* any more—there's no reason for them to; there's no focus.

SE: Well, I hope you're right and that it's not racially-inspired. Both of my children are of mixed heritage (as I am), and I'm wondering how you think it might be different for my little boy and girl if they were on the East Coast of the States today than it was for you?

RO: I think it's very different now. First of all, we have a mixed race president in the United States now, and that's enormously big—bigger than anyone has even begun to understand. I think that most Americans see him as black, but I see him as mixed race, and he sees himself as mixed race, and his becoming president was possible because of all of the other mixed race people who have become superstars in their various fields—Tiger Woods, Keanu Reeves . . . there's so many people now, so I think it is very, very different. In 2001 or 2002, *The New York Times* style section ran an article called “Ambiguously Ethnic”—this is the new chic thing. Being mixed race is cool now. And I think it's starting to happen in Japan now, too.

SE: Part of the question here is whether or not you felt racism directly.

RO: Well, the first overt racist stuff I felt was when we lived in California. My dad had a sabbatical from Stanford, and we were living in East Palo Alto, which was bad even then. I went to an elementary school called the Costano School. It was the first time I had been to a school where there were kids from a lot of different ethnic backgrounds. And there was more racism there.

SE: *More?* In a place where there were more ethnic backgrounds?

RO: Yes, because the Spanish kids were against the black kids, and the black kids were against the Asians, and everybody was struggling for turf. I got beaten up by a bunch of black girls in the bathroom. I was in second grade. I was really little. That was the first time it had ever happened to me. I just didn't understand what it was at all. That little episode in *My Year of Meats* where Jane is recounting something from her childhood—it is a softball game, and Jane hits a run and gets onto second or something, and the second-base person is a little black girl and says “Nice hit chink!” That is something that had happened to me, and I didn't understand what those words meant—“chink” and “Jap”—and that was very different from where I grew up in New Haven, attending a Yale Faculty brat school. I was very protected in New Haven. I didn't really experience racism until I went to the West Coast, and after that, I was more racially aware.

When we went back to New Haven—you know, I grew up in New Haven at the time when

Bobby Seale was being tried for murder in the New Haven Courthouse, and the Black Panthers^④ had taken over the New Haven Green,^⑤ you know, the SDS, the Weathermen^⑥; everybody was there—I was twelve or thirteen, and I was hanging out on the Green with the Black Panthers, wishing that I was black because I felt like I wasn't raced enough. I felt like I was pale yellow, and I wanted to be black. My sensibility was black. So I felt inadequate, racially inadequate. You know?

SE: Oh, I know. I grew up off-white in Vancouver with similar feelings, wanting to be Asian and feeling racially inadequate. Yes, I know.

RO: Exactly, exactly, so you know. So, yes, it would have been so much cooler if I had been black.

SE: In a lot of ways, certainly for my students in Seoul, you represent a model of considerable success—an Asian woman succeeding in America—and I think that some of my students want to be you.

RO: [laughing deeply]

SE: Any advice for them?

RO: Well, most of the good things that have happened to me have not been by design, but the one thing that my mother and father always told me—the thing that they did that meant more to me than anything else—was to do what I loved. They followed that as their guiding principle. So, from very early on, I was sensitive to trying to figure out what it was that I loved—and this is not a question that kids are being encouraged to ask, especially not in Japan (or in Korea). Writing novels or making horror films was not my parents' idea of a dignified job, but they told me that if I really liked doing this, then I should do it. That was something that was important to me, and I think that *that's* what defines success. If you've been able to do things that you love to do, things that make you happy, that don't hurt other people, and that contribute in some way, then that's about as good as it gets.

On producing, reproducing, and the environmental future

SE: So, when you are writing, do you have a target audience in mind? Also, I'm wondering if there is there a form that you are trying to destabilize when you write?

RO: That's an interesting question. I don't have any target audience in mind when I am writing. Certainly I never try to fit *into* a form. [long pause . . . thinking] And I'm not trying to destabilize a given form in any kind of overt way. It's not like I'm writing in reaction to anything in particular. With *My Year of Meats*, one of the things I was very interested in was using the first person and the third person, and in what was going to happen when you write one character in the first person and one character in the third person. I remember being worried for the longest time about when the first person and the third person met. I knew that they were going to have to meet. I remember thinking "Well, what's gonna happen? What's gonna happen? The whole thing's just gonna explode!" Of course, obviously, you write it from one perspective or the other. Anyway, that was kind of an exploration to see what would happen.

I was really interested in this idea of montage, having come from a film background. So I had the idea of layering it with the faxes and newspaper articles—and there was even a bit of screenplay in there. You know, using different bits of texturing devices: *that*—I thought—was interesting. That comes very much from film.

SE: You've got one foot in fiction, one foot in fact, one hand in humor, one hand in horror, with eyes (or perspective, at least) fixed, it seems, on intervention.

RO: I honestly think that this is what happens when you are bi-racial, when you are hybridized. Everything is destabilized. You don't have a fixed identity anywhere. I recognized this when I read Obama's *Dreams From My Father*. He's very similar to my brother. There's something that hybrid people share. Reality is a kind of tricky thing because it is constantly shifting.

SE: Yes, and one of the big things in *My Year of Meats* is authenticity.

RO: Yes, authenticity, right. That's why. That's where these themes come from. In *All Over Creation* as well, it's authenticity, it's cloning, it's diversity, it's all of these kinds of things.

SE: So, then, linking authenticity back with that question of destabilizing: you *know* that you are destabilizing the artistic structures, then, yes?

RO: Well, no, because I'm not really writing from that point of view. It wasn't really intentional, but I do like to push. I like to push the limits of language and I like to push the limits of form. When I'm writing, I'm working on a completely different level, a very intuitive level. You kind of have a sense of the way it should sound and you just push it to see if it works.

SE: Did you ever feel formulaic—not enough violence, not enough sex, gotta throw a bit of this in there, a bit of that...?

RO: [pause] No, but I think because I did so much television work, I have a sense of when things need to pick up. So that is kind of intuitive; it's about balancing the characters and having the voices come in in ways that make sense. So with Jane and Akiko, they would switch back and forth, whereas in *All Over Creation*, there were five point-of-view perspectives. In *All Over Creation*, it was a matter of keeping the voices coming in in ways that would keep the reader engaged so that the reader wouldn't forget characters.

SE: I'm wondering how you would respond to accusations that both of your novels express a kind of heteronormativity.

RO: What does that mean? That heterosexuality is the norm?

SE: Well, yes, in a sense. And reproduction. And there seems to be a real need for this reproduction in your novels.

RO: Probably because I didn't reproduce. I would imagine that that's probably where it comes from. Personal history stuff is always important. My parents had me when they were forty-two. I wrote *My Year of Meats* when I was just turning forty-one.

SE: Your book was your baby?

RO: Right, yes, in a way, exactly. At the same time, when I was writing, my parents were both ill and dying. My dad died in 1998, about a week before the publication date of *My Year of Meats*, and my mum died in 2004, about a year after *All Over Creation* was finished. I'd always had it in my mind that if I was going to have kids myself, I knew it would probably be late, but when I hit my forties, I was writing, and I was taking care of my two parents, and there was no space, no room for kids, couldn't do it, but reproductive issues were very much on my mind. And there's nothing like losing a parent to make you think about reproducing—I don't know if you still have your parents?

SE: My mum died last year.

RO: When you lose a parent—for women, I think, in particular—it really makes you think about having kids.

SE: I think it's the same for men, also. Sophia (my daughter) was born about ten months after my mother's death.

RO: There, you see, yeah, right. So, there's an urgency that comes up around that. Both books were written around this very crucial period, where I was thinking a lot about reproductive

issues, and coming to terms with the fact that I probably wouldn't reproduce, and so I think there's a kind of a sense of . . . the Japanese word *あこがれ* (憧れ) pops to mind, kind of a longing, that the books express. So, I think that's probably where the heteronormativity comes from.

SE: Any regrets?

RO: No, but there's always this sense of "the road not taken," and you always wonder.

SE: I'm wondering, at this point, how you feel about the future? In environmental terms. Do you imagine an *Oryx* and *Crake* kind of future, or a more idyllic sort of scene with UVic bunnies running around all over the place and cutting the lawns instead of lawn-mowers doing it?⁷

RO: You mean a UVic/Disney kind of pastoral thing?

SE: Yes, what kind of scenario do you see? After eight years of Bush in the White House putting us in a really bad way. . .

RO: A *really* bad way. . .

SE: Obama's election is great and really gives me a lot of hope, but, still, I feel very, very uncomfortable about the kind of world my kids' kids (if they have kids) are going to inherit. You know? How many species *are* there going to be left? And it seems to me that we've got a series of crises that are converging, that are coming together, and it looks really ugly and hot. You know, oceanic circulation patterns changing, bee populations falling (and the media not really being able to connect the dots and see why the price of food has gone up) . . .

RO: That's right, that's right. . .

SE: . . . and having said all of those gloomy things, how do you feel about the future?

RO: No, no, I agree with you, I agree with you. I don't think it's possible to know the future—I never think it's possible to know the future—but in this case, it's even more impossible to know because it's so complex. My feeling is that the future is going to be radically different in an unknowable kind of a way. In a sense, nature will never be the same—this thing we call "nature" (environment, ecology) is going to be very, very different. On the other hand, I also have a faith, an underlying faith in—not in humanity: I don't know whether our species is going to do so well—but in nature, which, in some form will be okay.

SE: Sure, well, nature was around before us and will be around after us. . .

RO: It will be around after us, and nature will be just fine. There's this Vonnegut's "universal will to become," and it's real. You can see it in the plants and the trees—and the bunnies. You know, it's always there.

SE: Christopher Manes in his chapter in *The Ecocriticism Reader* has talked about the transcendental narcissism of humans and of how if we were to go extinct tomorrow, "the event would go virtually unnoticed by the vast majority of Earth's life forms."

RO: That's right.

SE: Indeed, we flatter ourselves. If ants disappeared, the event would be catastrophic.

RO: That's right, that's right, though I think that there will probably be some form of human life, but what form will that be? There will probably be a lot fewer of us. Civilization and culture will probably be incredibly different, and chances are that all of this stuff that we are surrounded with will no longer be viable, and so everything that we've recorded and thought—you know, my books, your papers—will all be unreadable. And I think that that's just the way things are going to be. So, you can think of it as being sad, or you can think of it as just being the way things are. But who knows about the future? Who knows?

【Notes】

①Ozeki here is referring to the famous feminist scholar Ann Rosalind Jones, whose work in comparative literature and early modern studies has had profound impacts on Shakespeare studies, historicist theories, and cross-cultural reading. Jones is Esther Cloudman Dunn Professor of Comparative Literature at Smith College (which Ozeki attended) in Northampton, Massachusetts.

②DES (Diethylstilbestrol) is a growth hormone. It was “was one of the first synthetic estrogens made and used commercially in the US to fatten” cows and chickens for food production (See Gandhi and Snedeke2). It was also used in medicine. Found to be carcinogenic (specifically, to cause vaginal cancer not in the women who ingested DES but in their daughters), it was phased out in the 1970s, both in medical and livestock applications in the US. As of 2003, DES continues to be used for the farming of some kinds of crabs (大闸蟹) for human consumption in China. See Qing, Cao Chang, “Go and eat it, fearless Chinese!” *Epoch Times* 15 June 2009, <<http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/3/5/1/n306555.htm>>.

③Michael Pollan, “Playing God in the Garden,” *New York Times* 25 October 1998, accessed 15 June 2009, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/25/magazine/playing-god-in-the-garden.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>>.

④Bobby Seale was one of the co-founders of the Black Panther Party (an African-American party to promote cultural awareness, racial pride, and the nurturance and promotion of black political and cultural institutions and interests—what has become known as Black Power).

⑤The New Haven Green, a large privately-owned park built in 1638 in the center of New Haven, is bordered by the city buildings and by Yale University, and has a long history of hosting festivals, political demonstrations, and other gatherings.

⑥The SDS is the abbreviation for the American radical left student activist movement of the 1960s called “Students for a Democratic Society.” “The Weathermen” was a faction of the SDS.

⑦This interview was conducted at UVic (The University of Victoria). There are, according to Kim Westad, approximately 1000 rabbits running wild on the University of Victoria campus, feral descendants largely from abandoned pets. Despite their clear potential for reducing the amounts of fossil fuels burned in on-campus lawn-care and for providing ecologically-friendly grass management, Neil Connelly, UVic’s director of campus planning and sustainability, sees the rabbits as a potential threat to human welfare. See Kim Westad, “Rabbit Complaints Multiply at UVic,” *Times Colonist* 18 September 2007, accessed 15 June 2009, <http://www2.canada.com/victoria-timescolonist/news/capital_van_isl/story.html?id=b24481d4-9aec-433a-a23c-14f6ef76cd8b>

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