

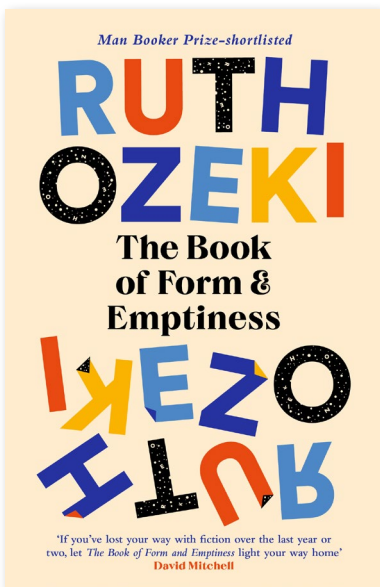
Women's Prize for Fiction 2022



2022 SHORTLIST

READING GUIDE

THE BOOK OF FORM AND EMPTINESS BY RUTH OZEKI



PLOT SUMMARY

One year after the death of his beloved musician father, thirteen-year-old Benny Oh begins to hear voices. The voices belong to the things in his house – a sneaker, a broken Christmas ornament, a piece of wilted lettuce. Although Benny doesn't understand what these things are saying, he can sense their emotional tone: some are pleasant, a gentle hum or coo, but others are snide, angry and full of pain. When his mother develops a hoarding problem, the voices grow more clamorous.

At first, Benny tries to ignore them, but soon the voices follow him outside the house, onto the street and at school, driving him at last to seek refuge in the silence of a large public library where objects speak in whispers. There he meets a variety of others on the fringes of society who adopt him, including a teenage performance artist and a homeless, alcoholic philosopher – as well as encountering a rather special book: his book, the story of his life.

Blending unforgettable characters, a riveting plot and a vibrant engagement with topics as diverse as climate change, jazz and our attachment to possessions, *The Book of Form and Emptiness* is bold, humane and heartbreaking.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In Buddhism, form is emptiness. That is, all form is impermanent and will eventually die or transform into something else. However, form is necessary to enable the continuation of the cycle of life – for example, a tree grows blossom every year which will bloom and then die in the natural cycle. But the tree has to maintain its form to allow for the brief span of the blossom's existence.

With this thought in mind, Buddhists like Ozeki would say that there is no point becoming attached to any particular thing, because all form is empty and does not have an intrinsic self. Therefore, in the title of the book, Ozeki is giving us a hint to the ideas she will explore in the book, including how we process a loved one's death – their lack of permanence.

Yet, though a person's body may die, is their absence as empty as the absence of a mere object? Benny's father Kenji may have died at the beginning of the book, but his presence runs throughout.

Sound is a huge theme of this book. Kenji is a jazz musician and he and Annabelle sing to Benny while he is still in the womb. The fact that Benny develops a problem hearing voices and sounds which overwhelm him after his father's death is pertinent: suddenly, the world is discordant when Kenji has gone. Jazz, in itself, is probably the genre of music which plays most cleverly with the line between discordance and pleasing the ear of the listener, so it's not at all surprising that Ozeki uses this context when she writes about making sense of the world: a world which is often difficult, clashing, distressing and without apparent sense or pattern. Sometimes, it can be difficult to find the balance between chaos and order for all of us, and especially after a traumatic event such as a bereavement.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ruth Ozeki is a novelist, filmmaker and Zen Buddhist priest. She is the award-winning author of three novels: *My Year of Meats*, *All Over Creation* and *A Tale for the Time Being*, which was shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize and translated into 28 languages. She has also written a short memoir, *The Face: A Time Code*. She is affiliated with the Everyday Zen Foundation and lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she teaches creative writing at Smith College and is the Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Ozeki examines the theme of hoarding in *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. Like Annabelle, the hoarders we watch on TV shows or witness in our own lives are usually motivated by a negative experience of some kind, and want to cling onto the things that give them a feeling of security. For Annabelle, it's Kenji's death that starts her hoarding and Benny's hearing of voices.

Indeed, the chaos of his home environment makes the voices much worse for Benny, as there are so many more things that want to talk to him in Annabelle's crowded house.

When he is admitted to the paediatric psychiatric ward, Benny is in fact relieved by the calm and uncluttered environment:

'As if the walls and ceilings and floors had been wiped clean of the residual suffering that was allowed to accumulate like dust in the corners and edges of rooms in ordinary homes.'

Objects 'speak' to both Annabelle and Benny – the difference being that Benny hears them in a literal sense and Annabelle's possessions provide an emotional crutch, reminding her of Kenji, calling out to her from the shelves in the shop, and providing a comfort in her daily work routine in her home office.

Do you think hoarding is more of a modern problem, given our immersion in consumer culture in the past 50 years? What do you think about the TV shows that present hoarding as entertainment? What is Ozeki telling us about consumerism in this book?

QUESTIONS

Ozeki talks about books as objects among Benny's Book's discussion of the Made and Unmade. Are books objects like hammers and tin cans, or are they different in some way? How?

Are libraries places of self-discovery, of knowledge, of a huge web of interconnected voices, of sanctuary – or all or none of these? How does Ozeki centre the library as a place of importance?

NEXT STEPS

In the paediatric psych ward, Benny meets Alice/Athena, who is making written 'event scores' and handing them out to her fellow patients. The event score is a feature of the Fluxus art movement which aimed to create live 'happenings' rather than fixed art pieces. Can art be in-the-moment as opposed to just a static thing that hangs on a gallery wall for a long time? Look at the work of performance artists such as Carolee Schneemann and Marina Abramovic who work with ideas of impermanence and one's place in the world. Are you inspired to write something, so that the art comes full circle?

Or, do you think you could benefit from a Marie Kondo/Cory-style clear out? As well as decluttering, choose two objects you love and write about them, as if they had a voice. Benny has his beloved marble and spoon. What objects hold deep significance for you? Have they got a story? Tell it if so.



From the beginning, this book captures your heart and imagination. Benny's journey into discovering the truth about life, himself and books is touching, humorous and beautiful in equal measure.'

Dorothy Koomson, 2022 Judge



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth Ozeki's central character is a young girl, Ruth, rather than a young male protagonist, reading the hopes and dreams of another girl, Nao, via her diary.

Strange Weather in Tokyo by **Hiromi Kawakami** is a tale of modern Japan and old-fashioned romance that blooms slowly between a woman in her 30s and her ex-schoolteacher.



WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?