

Beyond the pleasure principle

ALEX CLARK

Jamaica Kincaid

SEE NOW THEN
183pp. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$24.
978 0 374 18056 0

attempts to impose order through cleaning and tidying – all of which severely challenge Mr Sweet's wish to sit quietly in his studio composing his nocturne "This Marriage is Dead" (occasional variant title: "This Marriage Has Been Dead for a Long Time Now"). But perhaps the reason is even more straightforward, stemming simply from the fact that "nothing was ever the way she said".

See Now Then is fuelled by disappointment; but it is disappointment as likely to be occasioned by a desire being satisfied as being thwarted. When Mr Sweet requires one million lyres and one million musicians to perform his work, Mrs Sweet sets about making it so, even though she has virtually to found an industrial civilization to do so – planting fields of cotton, dispatching workers to salt mines, taking her goods to market, and so forth. On the day when the "elaborate and complicated and earth-changing fugue of Mr Sweet's was to be finally played", he comes down with a case of sore tendons in his heels; but what really ails him is a rage that "the dear Mrs Sweet had made his impossible demand possible".

Mr Sweet has little to recommend or sustain him beyond this rather clinical creativity, whereas Mrs Sweet's power – particularly in the conception and birth of her children – is seen as natural, spontaneous and unselfconscious. Mr Sweet regards the creation of "a thing" as far superior to the creation of a person, but his opinion is fatally undermined by his vituperative and misogynistic emotions. How else to regard someone who sees his wife as looking "like something to eat, but only if you hated eating"; who wishes that she and his son might be "dead, or stilled in a permanent way, not dead exactly just stilled"?

This wild imbalance between husband and wife obscures the novel's subtler currents; it hinders the reader from thinking – or even feeling – with much clarity about the terrifying roles that might be ascribed to individuals within families, and their inescapability. Where Kincaid is more successful is in allowing her loosely jointed prose style, with its mesmerizing repetitions, echoes and patterns, to suggest the notion of time and its circular properties; to plant the idea that, while human relationships can only exist in time, time also works to destroy them by the weight of accumulated dissatisfactions, and by the irrepressibility of individual will. Perhaps even more chillingly, she suggests that even were time past, present and future to be entirely visible to us, we would probably be unable to do anything to change it.

But is it medicine?

LEYLA SANAI

Matthew Reynolds

THE WORLD WAS ALL BEFORE
THEM

321pp. Bloomsbury. Paperback, £12.99.
978 1 4088 1796 4

Matthew Reynolds's well-received first novel, *Designs for a Happy Home* (reviewed in the *TLS*, May 15, 2009), looked at the life of an interior designer. His new book, *The World Was All Before Them*, also involves the art world but its main subject is medicine. Reynolds ranges from the physiology and anatomy of the body to holistic practices and the many challenges facing medics, including those caused by patients who try to coerce doctors into providing special or illegal treatment. The changes currently being wrought in the NHS are also explored. The author's medical research is exhaustive and judiciously employed.

The story revolves around Philip, a locum GP who is filling in for a year at a rural practice. He is faced with the usual dilemmas of general practice: other GPs bypassing medical protocol; the enthusiasm of patients for non-evidence-based alternative or homeopathic medicine; patients who refuse active treatment to palliate symptoms. Sue, Philip's girlfriend, works in an art gallery, and is helping to organize an exhibition that focuses on the response of individuals to the flood of stimuli that constantly assault our senses. The couple's environment is described in minute detail, as are the mechanics of their movements and activities, and while Reynolds's prose is always lucid and elegant, the degree of detail risks upsetting the narrative thrust of the story. More successful is the juxtaposition of Philip and Sue's actions in the same sentences, a technique that echoes Will Self's recent novel *Umbrella* (2012).

The World Was All Before Them is divided into four chapters, corresponding to the seasons. The cyclical structure mirrors the cycle of life, which we also see through an elderly patient, whose past emerges in tantalizing glimpses during the latter part of the story. A drawback to this construction is that when, for example, a thrilling event looms 200 pages into the book, the action then cuts to three months later, in a deflating anticlimax. There are some other tiny cavils: the body's natural opioids are endorphins and enkephalins, not endorphins and morphine; the vocal cords are not chords; cyanide degrades over decades; pancreatic enzymes (not bacteria) might auto-digest after death, but bacteria are confined to the large bowel and skin. These are more than compensated for by the breadth of Reynolds's reflections around medicine and art, and his astute dissection of the dynamics of relationships. He negotiates the ethical and practical dilemmas of medicine, and the grey area between creativity and charlatanism in art, with great aplomb.

If not now, when?

NATASHA LEHRER

Ruth Ozeki

A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING
420pp. Canongate. £20.
978 0 85786 796 4

Buddhist nun called Jiko. Certain facts – that Ozeki herself is a Japanese-American novelist called Ruth, an ordained Buddhist priest married to an artist called Oliver, living on an island off the coast of British Columbia – are enmeshed in what evolves into a tantalizing meditation about the relationship between reader and writer, which at one point threatens to unravel the narrative. As Nao's diary begins literally to unwrite itself, leaving pages that were once filled with her handwriting completely blank, it is up to Ruth to return the words to the page. The episode in which Ruth dreams the diary's ending back into being is a powerful image of a writer's responsibility to her characters and story.

Ozeki beautifully captures Nao's teenage voice, with its conflicting harmonies of bathos and intensity, stoicism and optimism:

If you've ever tried to keep a diary, then you'll know that the problem of trying to write about the past really starts in the present. . . . Not that now is ever all that interesting. Now is usually just me, sitting in some dumpy maid café or on a stone bench at a temple on the way to school,

moving a pen back and forth a hundred billion times across a page, trying to catch up with myself.

Having spent most of her childhood in California, Nao returns to Japan, but finds herself an outsider in the strict and hierarchical social microcosm of her Tokyo school. Bullied and humiliated, she abruptly leaves and is coerced into working as a hostess by a young woman whose pimping she mistakes for kindness. It is only when she agrees to spend the summer at the mountainside temple with her great-grandmother that she begins to understand her place in the world and in her family.

"A time being is someone who lives in time", Nao proclaims at the beginning of her diary. But Buddhism helps her to question this. Ruth also finds her sense of time unravelling; it is Oliver who reminds her that whatever happened to Nao and her father is in the past, not the present. As the novel draws to a close, with an extended riff on quantum mechanics, Schrödinger's cat and the influence of perception on physical reality, the reader shares with Ruth a series of revelations about the human need for resolution, and the impossibility of getting it. Even as a novelist Ruth cannot tell us precisely how Nao's story ends. Reaching the final pages of this fine book, the reader realizes that solace is contained in resolution's very opposite, uncertainty, offering us the far greater gift of possibility instead.

Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* is a huge, compassionate and cleverly wrought novel about a Japanese teenager, Nao, and a Japanese-American novelist, Ruth, who finds Nao's diary inside a Hello Kitty lunchbox washed up on a beach off the coast of British Columbia. Ruth becomes obsessed with the diary and with the other artefacts contained inside the plastic lunchbox, including the wristwatch of a "sky soldier" – a Second World War kamikaze pilot – another diary written in French, and a stack of letters in Japanese. As she reads Nao's diary and becomes increasingly desperate to find out whether Nao and her family survived the tsunami of 2011, the boundaries between fact and fiction begin to blur. Ruth's own relationships – with her recently deceased mother, her artist husband Oliver, their pet cat and the wild and sometimes desolate island where they live – become part of the story of her need to uncover the details of Nao's life, as well as those of Nao's father and her 104-year-old great-grandmother, a

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