



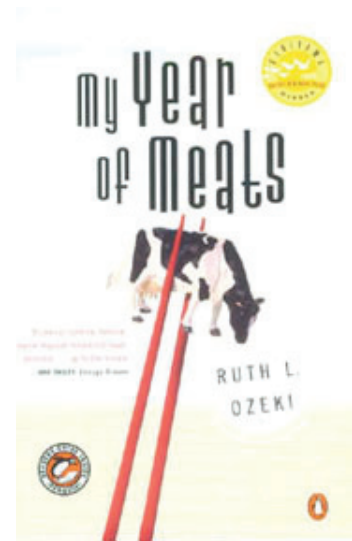
Voices
from the
Gaps

My Year of Meats by Ruth Ozeki

Meat is the Message. Each weekly half hour episode of My American Wife! must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. Its the meat (not the Mrs.) whos the star of our show! Of course, the "Wife of the Week" is important too. She must be attractive, appetizing and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America.

— Ozeki, p. 8

Ruth L. Ozeki's debut novel, *My Year of Meats*, is a tale of diversity and every reader is bound to have a unique relationship with the book. Obviously, meat and beef take center stage, but more often in a supporting role rather than as the star of the show. The narrator reveals many beef industry secrets that cause the reader to wonder what is fact and what is fiction. The story is told by Jane Takagi-Little, a first generation Japanese American with Midwestern roots and a self described, "polysexual, polyracial, perverse" documentarian whose faxes, script copy, letters, poetry, and recipes narrate her experience working for the beef industry in Japan, in search for the weekly star of the show she produces called *My American Wife!* Ozeki's use of the Beef Industry as the power behind all the activity in the book is brilliant. Every character in the book is unwittingly affected by the nameless faceless beef industry and its power to shape perspective, society, and knowledge. Ozeki takes a risk here as she casts a stark light on the business of American beef. She paints a grim picture, revealing the effects of beef production on the environment and our bodies.



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The story is set in the modern day United States of America, and the reader will follow Jane as she zigzags across the country in search of all American beefeaters. Along the way, we discover the difficulty of her task as her editors reject some of her most colorful ideas of the American wife. The result is a poignant, humorous, and often pitiful consideration of what it means to be American in the United States. In an effort to assist Jane in her search, her boss notes in a memo: “Market studies do show that the average Japanese wife finds a middle-to-upper class white American woman with two to three children to be both sufficiently exotic and yet reassuringly familiar. The agency has asked us to focus on wives within these demographic specifications. . .” (Ozeki, p. 13). However, Jane has her own ideas on what it means to be authentically American. Will this weeks show feature Suzie Flowers and her Coca Cola (not Pepsi please!) Roast? Or perhaps Becky Thayer and her Chicken Fried Steak Orientale? Mrs. Martinez and her Texas-style Beefy Burritos? Or will it be Mrs. Payne from Peerless, Montana, and her recipe for Beef Fudge? Which one of these wives will ultimately epitomize an American wife for a foreign audience? Often, the distinction between stereotyping and authenticity is blurred throughout the novel.

Janes search for authentic America reveals the matrix of identities in which most Americans exist. Is the book about Americanism, capitalism, sexism, racism, classism, or is it a criticism of American consumption? Or, is it simply a book promoting vegetarianism? The only way to find out is to read it for yourself. Ultimately, the reader will be faced with all these issues throughout the whole story. A powerful commentary on Americanism and the construction of it, *My Year of Meats* successfully illustrates the complexities of American identity in a global community.

As a debut novel, *My Year of Meats* has the potential to be quite controversial. The reader will no doubt share in Jane’s horror as she discovers an overdeveloped toddler whose breasts and pubic hair are allegedly a result of exposure to the antibiotics and hormones her family uses on their cattle farm. Ozeki is obviously critical of meat production in America, as well as so many other things, but her criticisms are tucked safely into a fictional novel. *My Year of Meats* is at once savvy and vulnerable. The reader will undoubtedly be thinking about it long after finishing the last page.

Reviewed by Lydia Nobello