

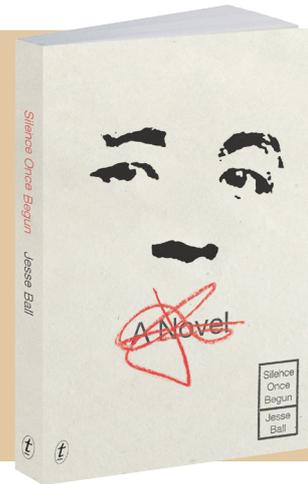
# Silence Once Begun

Jesse Ball

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## Praise for *Silence Once Begun*

'Daring...*Silence Once Begun* is a wondrous and provocatively strange reading experience that places the actual Jesse Ball among our most compelling and daring writers today.'—*The LA Review of Books*

'A Kafkaesque premise rests at the center of Jesse Ball's intriguing fourth novel, *Silence Once Begun*. . . Ball's calculated use of silence is masterful, and the novel haunts us, like any unsolved crime.'—*Bookpage*

'Absorbing, finely wrought. . . a piercing tragedy. . . that combines subtlety and simplicity in such a way that it causes a reader to go carefully, not wanting to miss a word.'—Helen Oyeyemi, *The New York Times Book Review*

## About Jesse Ball

Jesse Ball is the author of three previous novels, *Samedi the Deafness*, *The Way Through Doors* and *The Curfew*. His prizes include the 2008 *Paris Review* Plimpton Prize; his verse has been included in the Best American Poetry series. He gives classes on lucid dreaming and lying in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

## A reader's introduction to *Silence Once Begun*

A novel presented in documentary style; a story about a search for truth that draws attention to the impossibility of truth; a book about silence that is filled with 'records' of people speaking—this spare and distinctive work is full of provocative contradictions.

Questions about identity, love, memory and truth are at the heart of *Silence Once Begun*, each explored through the central idea of silence. After his wife falls silent, the narrator (who shares the name of the author) tells us that he 'sought after all understanding that could be had of silence, of who becomes silent and why' (ix). He comes across the story of Oda Sotatsu, a man who refused to speak, even in his own

defence, after signing a confession to a crime he did not commit. The 'Narito Disappearances' where eight people vanished from their homes, a single playing card found on each door has authorities baffled—until a confession is delivered to the police, signed by Oda.

The narrator Jesse Ball, who refers to himself as the Interviewer, hears versions of the story through Oda Sotatsu's family, the two people who set him up to sign the confession in a bet, a journalist and a prison guard. He also presents transcripts of police interviews, and newspaper accounts. Many of the versions contradict each other, and characters continually warn the Interviewer not to trust what the other characters say.

The framing narrative of his wife's silence as the motivation for the narrator seeking out stories of silence becomes particularly important when he finds Jito Joo, the woman who was part of the wager, and who frequently visited Sotatsu in jail. While the Interviewer was estranged from his wife by silence, Joo discovered her love for Sotatsu through silence.

The book ends with a version of the story from the perspective of Sato Kakuzo—the architect of the wager. Here we discover Sato's motivation, and the secret of what happened to the people who disappeared. And yet so many questions remain unanswered, or have multiple answers. Where does the truth lie?

## Questions for discussion

1. What can silence tell you? What does it tell the characters? Do they read it correctly? Is silence a truth or a lie?
2. How do different characters react differently to Sotatsu's silence?
3. Does the narrator succeed in his quest to gain an understanding of silence, 'of who becomes silent and why' (ix)?

4. Did you believe any of the characters were telling the truth? What parts of what they said were true and untrue? Did they think they were telling the truth or were they deliberately lying?
5. When the Interviewer tells Mr Oda he wants the account to be complete, Mr Oda responds: 'that this was an idea with no merit, that there wasn't anything complete' (65). Is the narrator looking for a complete account? Is Mr Oda right?
6. Do you feel like you ever got to the truth about what happened?
7. Does truth matter?
8. 'One has the impression that one can know life, actual life from its simulacrum by the fact that actual life constantly deceives and reveals, and is consistent in doing so' (4). Is this novel a 'simulacrum' that allows us to know 'actual life'?
9. Did Sato Kakuzo have a valid point to make about confession, evidence and truth? Was this truly his motivation in setting up Sotatsu Odo? Was it a political point? Is the book making a political point of this nature?
10. Why has the author taken such care to have the Interviewer assuring us he is being as accurate as possible, by, for example, inserting disclaimers about names and dates being altered, or telling us when the recording is inaudible?
11. Discuss the tension between realism and artifice in the novel.
12. Why does the narrator describe writing in a 'novelistic fashion' as a 'failing' (x)?
13. When talking to the prison guard, the narrator tells us he won't reproduce the 'tedious discussion of my own life, as it has no bearing here' (122). Clearly, the narrator's life does have a bearing on his search. Why does he say it doesn't? There are many such contradictions to discuss—find some others.
14. Are we meant to believe that Sotatsu Odo was feeling the same things as Jito Joo was about their interactions? Does it matter?
15. What is the meaning of the fable of the man falling in love with the tree? What of the fable of the stone cutter? Is the story about Sotatsu and Jiro and the gate a fable? Is the entire novel a fable?
16. Why has the author chosen 1970s Japan as the setting for the story?
17. What meaning do you take from the series of photographs?
18. Discuss the language used in the novel. How does it differ from the narrative style of most novels? Would you describe it as poetic? What is the effect of this style?
19. What is the novel saying about love?
20. 'Silence Once Begun' sounds like it could be the start of a saying. Based on your reading of the novel, how do you think such a saying would end?