



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Joy Luck Club

by Amy Tan



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Preface

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is itself a joyful study in luck. An intricately patterned novel whose author thought she was writing a short-story collection, it is also a mother-daughter saga by a writer whose own mother wanted her to be anything but a writer.

Published in 1989 by an unknown first-time writer, *The Joy Luck Club* became a reviewers' darling and then an international best seller. The novel tells the story of new waves of immigrants who are changing and enriching America.

“To me, imagination is the closest thing we have to compassion. To have compassion you have to be able to imagine the lives of others, including people who are suffering, and people whose lives are affected by us.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* was written as a collection of short stories, but the tales of memory, fate, and self-discovery interlock to create a colorful mural that reads like a novel. All four sections open with a Chinese fable, then shift to the stories of four pairs of mothers and daughters. The tone switches from mundane to magical to darkly humorous.

The tales, particularly those set in China, are by turns beautiful and harrowing.

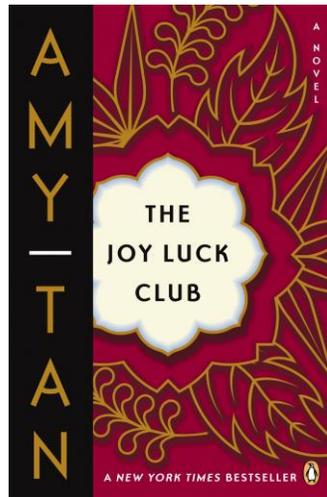
The first story begins two months after Jing-mei "June" Woo loses her mother, Suyuan, to a brain aneurysm. Her mother's best friends—June's "aunties"—invite June to take Suyuan's place at their mah jong table so she can sit at the East, "where everything begins."

Suyuan Woo had invented the original Joy Luck Club in China, before the Japanese invaded the city of Kweilin. They had used the group to help shield themselves from the harshness of war. As they feasted on whatever they could find, they transformed their stories of hardship into ones of good fortune.

After Suyuan reaches the United States, she resurrects the Joy Luck Club with three other Chinese émigrés, and the four reinvent themselves in San Francisco's Chinatown. These four mothers hope the mix of "American circumstances with Chinese character" will give their daughters better lives.

In each section of the novel, June recounts her late mother's fantastic tales on evenings after "every bowl had been washed and the Formica table had been wiped down twice." Every time Suyuan tells her daughter about Kweilin, she invents a new ending. But one night she reveals the real ending—how she lost her twin daughters while fleeing the Japanese invasion: "Your father is not my first husband. You are not those babies."

After her mother's death, June realizes that she had not fully understood her mother's past or her intentions. She journeys to China to discover what her mother had lost there. She is feverish to find out who she is, where she came from, and what future she can create—so she can finally join the Joy Luck Club.



Major Characters in the Book

Mothers

Suyuan Woo

Suyuan's story is told through her daughter. She was forced to leave her twin babies on the road in China while fleeing the Japanese invasion.

An-mei Hsu

At age nine, An-mei joins her widowed mother, who is exiled as a rich man's fourth wife. Her mother commits suicide. In the U.S., An-mei questions her faith when her youngest son drowns.

Lindo Jong

As a child, Lindo outwits her mother-in-law to escape her arranged marriage. Later, she brags about her American-born daughter but also longs for Waverly to notice their similarities.

Ying-ying St. Clair

When her philandering husband dies, Ying-ying leaves her wealthy family and starts over as a shopgirl. She marries an American merchant and emigrates but suffers from episodes of depression as an adult.

Daughters

Jing-mei "June" Woo

June is a sensitive child whose mother wants her to become a piano prodigy. After learning the truth about her mother's past, she travels to China to find her lost sisters.

Rose Hsu Jordan

Timid Rose is overwhelmed by American choices, but she finds conviction in the midst of a bewildering divorce.

Waverly Jong

A chess champion as a child, Waverly grows up to become a successful tax attorney. She worries about her mother's opinion of her white fiancé.

Lena St. Clair

Generous Lena shares her mother's powers of intuition but remains powerless to act on them. The prickly division of household expenses reveals the impoverishment of her marriage.

About the Author

Amy Tan (b. 1952)

Amy Tan was born February 19, 1952, in Oakland, California. Her parents shared some of the dark history fictionalized in *The Joy Luck Club*. Her mother, Daisy, was born to a wealthy family and left Shanghai and a disastrous marriage right before the Communist takeover in 1949. She was forced to leave behind her three daughters. Tan's father, John, a Baptist minister and electrical engineer, also fled the civil war in China. Tan and her two brothers were raised in Santa Clara, California.



Amy Tan, 2003 (Copyright Robert Foothorap)

Tan was a good student. At age eight, her treatment of the theme "What the Library Means to Me" won her a transistor radio and mention in the local newspaper. When Tan was fourteen, her brother Peter and her father died within seven months of each other, both from brain tumors. A neurosurgeon gave no explanation other than bad luck. This twin tragedy spurred Daisy Tan to hoist anchor and move the family to Switzerland. After they returned to California, Tan was ready for college, where she eschewed her mother's wish for her to study medicine and studied literature instead. She met her husband, Lou DeMattei, on a blind date in Oregon while enrolled in one of the seven undergraduate institutions she attended. Tan followed him to San Jose, California, where she later earned an MA in linguistics in 1973.

While Tan was a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley, her best friend was murdered. Shocked by the event, Tan left school and started working with children as a language development consultant. Her love of reading reawakened in 1985, when she read many woman novelists for the first time, including Louise Erdrich and Maxine Hong Kingston. Tan settled into a lucrative business-writing career, but restlessness led her to a writing workshop. Her second story, "Waiting Between the Trees," was noticed by a literary agent.

Tan started *The Joy Luck Club* two years after her first trip to China with her mother in 1987, and she completed it in less than five months. The book stayed on the bestseller list for nine months and has been translated into thirty-six languages. Tan cowrote the screenplay for the 1993 movie, and she and her husband appear in the movie as guests at the opening dinner party. Besides writing, she toured with

the now defunct benefit band the Rock Bottom Remainders, which included fellow writers Stephen King, James McBride, and Matt Groening. Her fifth novel, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, was published in 2005.

An Interview with Amy Tan

On August 7, 2006, Dana Gioia, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, interviewed Amy Tan at her home in Berkeley, California. An excerpt from their conversation follows.

Dana Gioia: You were born in Oakland in a family where both parents had come from China. Were you raised bilingually?

Amy Tan: Until the age of five, my parents spoke to me in Chinese or a combination of Chinese and English, but they didn't force me to speak Mandarin. In retrospect, this was sad, because they believed that my chance of doing well in America hinged on my fluency in English. Later, as an adult, I wanted to learn Chinese. Now I make an effort when I am with my sisters, who don't speak English that well. It's such a wonderful part of me that is coming back, to try and speak that language.

DG: Would you explain the special symbolism of your title, *The Joy Luck Club*?

AT: I don't think joy and luck are specific to Chinese culture. Everybody wants joy and luck, and we all have our different notions about from where that luck comes. Many Chinese stores and restaurants have the word "luck" in there. The idea is that, just by using the word "luck" in names of things, you can attract more of it. Our beliefs in luck are related to hope. Some people who are without almost any hope in a situation still cling to luck.

DG: This is a great book about the American immigrant experience. Did you think about that theme consciously when writing the book?

AT: If I thought about this at all, it was the immigrant experience according to my mother and father. This influenced the way I took their immigrant story—the things that I rejected, the things that I thought were American. The basic notion of this country is that with self-determination, you can create who you are. That, in turn, allows an amazing freedom to a writer, because freedom is also creativity.

DG: Why is reading important?

AT: In childhood, reading provided a refuge for me, especially during difficult times. It provided me with the idea that I could find an ending that was different from what was

happening at the time. Imagination is the closest thing that we have to compassion and empathy. When you read about the life of another person, you are part of their life for that moment. This is so vital, especially today, when we have so much misunderstanding across cultures and even within our own communities.

DG: What did you read as a child?

AT: I read every fairy tale I could lay my hands on at the public library. It was a wonderful world to escape to.

DG: Do you feel that your early love of fairy tales expressed itself in *The Joy Luck Club*, or did you look on its content as realistic?

AT: As a minister, my father told us many stories from the Bible that were like fairy tales. Those stories can reflect very strong beliefs that Christians have, but they also have all the qualities that are wonderful about fairy tales. Life is larger than we think it is. Certain events can happen that we don't understand, and we can take it as faith in a particular area, or as superstition, or as a fairy tale, or something else. It's wonderful to come to a situation and think that it can be all kinds of possibilities. I look at what's happened to me as a published writer and, sometimes, I think it's a fairy tale.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Amy Tan

1920s

- 1921: The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) forms.
- 1928: Chiang Kai-shek unites the Nationalists.

1930s

- 1934-35: The Long March helps Mao Zedong consolidate power.
- 1937: Japan launches a full-scale war with China.
- 1937: Nanking, the newly established capital of China, falls to Japan on December 13.

1940s

- 1941: Japan bombs Pearl Harbor. China and America form an alliance.
- 1949: The People's Republic of China is established. Daisy Tan boards the last boat out of Shanghai safely.

1950s

- Socialist realism becomes the popular artistic form, deemed most appropriate for the new republic in China.
- 1952: Amy Tan is born in Oakland, California.

1960s

- Chairman Mao Zedong launches the Cultural Revolution. Bourgeoisie values and an older generation of artists and intellectuals are attacked and killed.
- 1960: Amy Tan wins her first writing contest.
- 1968: Tan family moves to Montreux, Switzerland.

1970s

- 1972: Nixon is the first U.S. president to visit China.
- 1975: Maxine Hong Kingston publishes *The Woman Warrior*.

- 1977: Mao Zedong's death ends the Cultural Revolution; the "Gang of Four" take the fall for its chaos.
- 1979: Diplomatic ties established between China and America.

1980s

- 1981: Maya Lin's design for Vietnam Veterans Memorial is chosen by an NEA-funded design competition.
- 1987: Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, the first feature film to show the Forbidden City, wins nine Oscars.
- 1989: *The Joy Luck Club* is published.

1990s

- Breakthrough decade for Chinese-American fiction and movies. Tan publishes four more books.
- 1991: Amy Tan's essay "Mother Tongue" is chosen for *Best American Essays*.
- 1993: *The Joy Luck Club*, cowritten by Amy Tan and Ronald Bass, is released as a feature film.

2000s

- 2000: *Sagwa* becomes a PBS cartoon series for children, based on Tan's book, *Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat*.
- 2005: Tan's fifth novel, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, is published.

World War II and San Francisco's Chinatown

The War

The Joy Luck Club is set in two places: China in the 1930s and 1940s and San Francisco's Chinatown from the 1960s through the 1980s. Since Chinatown was a haven within an isolated country, the experiences of Tan's fictionalized daughters differ sharply from their mothers' generation, which was displaced by war.

The turn of the twentieth century hailed massive upheavals for China, with the end of the Imperial dynastic system and the opening of China to global influences. These changes led to civil wars between the Nationalists and the Communists. The leader of the Nationalist Party, or the Kuomintang, was Chiang Kai-shek, and Mao Tse-tung led the Communist Party. The Long March, a 6,000-mile-long retreat of the Red Army in 1934-35, enabled Mao to consolidate his power. (Survivors of the march are heroes to this day.)

The Chinese peasantry was lifted by Mao's doctrine, which encouraged his soldiers to "not take a single needle or a piece of thread from the masses"—masses often terrorized by the nationalist Kuomintang. The Nationalists, who were armed with the need to combat Western hegemony, clashed with the Communists, who were strengthened by their appeal for the many rural poor.

These two groups formed fragile alliances to fight a guerilla war against waves of Japanese invaders in the 1930s. Although few in number, the Japanese gained control of major Chinese cities and coasts.

As the United States entered World War II in 1941, the marriage of convenience between the Kuomintang and Communists against Japan was falling apart. The U.S. backed the Nationalists, although corruption among Kuomintang generals diverted supplies and information to the Japanese. This corruption and political instability, coupled with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, drove many Chinese to emigrate.

The Neighborhood

These Chinese took the already well-worn route to California, which to this day retains the largest Chinese population in the United States. The Chinese still refer to San Francisco as "Old Gold Mountain," because the first wave of émigrés had come through the Port of San

Francisco at the start of the Gold Rush. They had formed tight networks and built "Little Shanghai," because exclusionary laws made it difficult for Asian immigrants to assimilate or gain citizenship.

For decades the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had limited imported labor. The World War II alliance between China and the United States became instrumental in repealing this and other exclusionary laws. The immigrant population slowly shifted from male sojourners to permanent citizens.

Even though racial bias persisted in immigration law until at least 1965, families thrived in Chinatown, with its familiar Chinese customs, food, and merchandise. By the 1960s Chinatown's seedy intrigue existed only in movies, and it became an alluring tourist destination—an exotic island of a different culture in the middle of a major American city, complete with temples, fortune cookie factories, and, of course, Chinese restaurants. The famous Chinatown gate went up in 1970. Nine years later, diplomatic ties were reestablished between the two countries, making it easier for Chinese-American families to reunite.

Other Works/Adaptations

Amy Tan's Style and Her Other Works

"So easy to read!" was Daisy Tan's reaction to her daughter Amy's stories. Tan's style is deliberately transparent and neat. Her writing captures the different "Englishes" with which she grew up—her mother's "broken English," her own "watered-down" translation to English from Chinese, and the "simple" English used by the generations to communicate with one another. Tan crystallizes these forms to capture Chinese imagery and rhythms. She strives to give accurate voice to the characters, expressing the immigrant experience by borrowing the unique characteristics of the melded languages. Tan's much-anthologized essay "Mother Tongue" illuminates how she developed this unique writing style.

The themes of *The Joy Luck Club* include family, heritage, assimilation, and fate. Many of Tan's characters struggle to reconcile American individuality and freedom of choice with Chinese wisdom and respect for tradition. Tan excavates the bones of human relationships through singular characters, quick pacing, and sharp storytelling.

Tan transforms family history to serve "emotional memory." As depicted in *The Joy Luck Club*, her grandmother was a fourth wife, a concubine who ended her life by swallowing an overdose of opium. Tan's mother was the small child who witnessed the suicide. Tan has said, "When I place that memory in a fictive home, it becomes imagination [....] It has the power to change my memory of the way things really happened."

The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Writing Life (2003) is a collection of essays, speeches, and articles. Here Tan writes that her mother told her, "For many years, I carried this shame on my back, and my mother suffered, because she couldn't say anything to anybody." Tan's joy-luck stories grew out of the will to give her mother back her voice.

Tan's first four novels feature generations learning to understand one another and the clash between cultures. In *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), Winnie tells her daughter Pearl the stories of war-torn China in the 1940s.

The Moon Lady (1992) and *Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994) are illustrated children's books. *The Moon Lady* retells Ying-ying St. Clair's story of the Moon Festival from *The Joy Luck Club* for children. The second book, inspired by Tan's favorite cat, was later turned into *Sagwa*, a children's cartoon series for PBS.

Ghosts are a prevalent symbol in Tan's third novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). Olivia, the first-generation American protagonist, meets Kwan, her Chinese step-sister, who can see "yin people"—or ghosts. In *The Bonesetter's*

Daughter (2001), the heroine translates her Alzheimer's-afflicted mother's journal in an attempt to understand their shared past.

Most of the action in *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) takes place in the present, as twelve American tourists travel to Burma. The narrator, Bibi, is a travel-agent ghost. True to Tan's style, the depiction of the characters' lives is deeply convincing, as if channeled from the chorus of many ghosts.

Some of Tan's recent work breaks from the theme of mothers and daughters, but her gift of storytelling—passed on from her mother—endures. At the peak of her career, Tan's deceptively simple handiwork lasts, ensuring her work will be shared and enjoyed between new American generations and around the world.

Books by Amy Tan

- *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989
- *The Kitchen God's Wife*, 1991
- *The Moon Lady*, 1992
- *Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat*, 1994
- *The Hundred Secret Senses*, 1995
- *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, 2001
- *The Opposite of Fate*, 2003
- *Saving Fish from Drowning*, 2005
- *The Valley of Amazement*, 2013

Discussion Questions

1. Which story is your favorite and why? Do you prefer the stories set in China or California?
2. How are the notions of balance (yin and yang) and energy flow (feng shui) an important theme in the novel? Does the Chinese notion of balance and flow translate to the characters' lives in America?
3. *The Joy Luck Club* was written as a collection of short stories. Is the order important? Could this have been told as a single story? What would that change?
4. In your experience, does the book reinforce or shatter stereotypes of Chinese culture?
5. By telling a story from the perspective of Chinese immigrants and first-generation Americans, what does the book reveal about American culture?
6. Tan has said that she wishes to break from "the ghetto of ethnic literature." Does *The Joy Luck Club* cross from the ethnic to the universal?
7. Although June is not sure why her mother gives her the jade necklace, she assumes it's because of her humiliation by Waverly. Is she right?
8. How do the struggles of the daughters mirror the tragedies of their mothers? What does this suggest about the relationships between parents and children?
9. Ying-ying sees herself as both a tiger and a ghost. Why does she use these characterizations? How would Lena? How would they be different?
10. The "broken English" of the mothers is often more colorful than the "perfect English" of their daughters. How does the way the mothers choose to express themselves reflect their identities? What is lost in translation?
11. How do the mothers decide to use their mah jong winnings? Does this show assimilation? Why, or why not?
12. The ritual of mah jong is central to the story. What rituals do American women perform that reflect culture and identity?

Additional Resources

Other Works about Chinese History and Culture

- "Becoming American: The Chinese Experience." A Bill Moyers Special from PBS. (See <http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/> for more information.)
- Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Chang, Jung. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. 1991. New York: Touchstone, 2003.
- Zee, A. *Swallowing Clouds: A Playful Journey Through Chinese Culture, Language, and Cuisine*. 1990. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002.

If you want to read some of Amy Tan's favorite books, you might enjoy:

- Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, 1847
- J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951
- Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, 1955
- Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1988

If you want to read books that influenced Amy Tan as a storyteller, you might enjoy:

- Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 1975
- Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, 1984
- Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, 1985

Websites

- [Amy Tan's Website](http://www.AmyTanAuthor.com)
Amy Tan's website provides photos, essays, events and biographical information.
www.AmyTanAuthor.com
- [Guide to the Chinese in California Virtual Collection](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt5p3019m2)
An introduction to San Francisco's Chinatown on the Online Archive of California.
www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt5p3019m2
- [Academy of Achievement](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/tan0pro-1)
Amy Tan's profile on the Academy of Achievement website.
<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/tan0pro-1>

Credits

Works Cited

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<http://www.salon.com/1995/11/12/tan/singleton/>

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Cover image: "Studio shot of Mahjong pieces on white background" by Lars Hallstrom. Shutterstock.



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Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



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