Tan, Amy

from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*


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Summary Article: Tan, Amy

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Amy Tan enjoys great popularity as a Chinese American fiction writer. Beginning with the success of her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Tan has sought to represent Chinese American women's life experiences across cultural spaces and historical periods and to explore popular themes such as mother-daughter relationships, generational conflicts, matrilineal inheritance, biculturalism, as well as reconnection with ethnic heritage in American contexts. She has so far produced five novels, two juvenile novels, and one book collection of essays.

Born into a Chinese immigrant family in Oakland, California in 1952, Tan grew up under the parental pressure to become a medical professional but defied her parents' wish by majoring in language studies. She received her BA and MA in English and linguistics at San Jose State University and pursued her PhD in linguistics at the University of California, Santa Cruz and Berkeley before she finally left the program in 1976. She worked as a successful technical writer for several years but soon committed herself wholeheartedly to creative writing.

The *Joy Luck Club*, as Tan's first success, defines a major thematic pattern in her work – the evolving mother-daughter relationship embedded in complex historical and cross-cultural contexts. Structured around 16 interrelated stories of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their four US-born daughters, the novel dramatizes generational conflict from the perspectives of the Americanized daughters, but complicates the meanings of the conflict by allowing the immigrant mothers to speak in their own voices, thus evoking a cultural logic derived from their life experiences in China. The final reconciliation in this light not only suggests a better understanding between mothers and daughters but also highlights the mothers' eagerness to share their knowledge of mysterious Chinese cultural traditions and social practices.

Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), reinforces the thematic pattern of an evolving mother-daughter relationship and accentuates the mother's previous experience in China as central to the final reconciliation. In detailing the mother's struggle in a politically unstable and culturally feudal China, this novel redefines the mother's experience in terms of survival strategy and unpredictable human nature. As the mother reveals her dark secret of infanticide in the end, reconciliation becomes a matter of forgiveness on the part of the daughter.

As both of her two novels received critical attention and achieved commercial successes, Tan started...
working on juvenile novels and produced *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994), which would address in depth some underexplored themes in her previous work. While the former text is an extended elaboration of a chapter with the same title in *The Joy Luck Club*, the latter is about a mother cat telling her kittens the story of their ancestor Sagwa of China, and trying to outwit an evil magistrate who gives bad orders in the kingdom of cats.

In her third novel, *The One Hundred Senses* (1995), Tan focuses on a slightly different theme and explores the relationship between two half-sisters, Olivia, born and raised in the United States, and Kwan, born in China but recently arriving in the United States. Through a dramatization of Kwan’s mysterious world of “Yin” and superstitious understanding of reincarnation, Tan exposes the “absurdity” of the old world of China on the one hand, but validates its spiritualism and mysticism on the other. Through her journey to China with her European American husband and Kwan, Olivia as the protagonist finally develops a better sense of her own identity, and appreciates her half sister.

The *Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001) shows Tan’s return to her familiar theme of the mother and daughter relationships and her employment of autobiographical elements in her work. Through the revelation of two packets of documents left behind by the mother, who had Alzheimer’s disease, the daughter, a San Francisco-based ghostwriter for technical books, discovers the extraordinary life that her mother had lived in China and the curse that the family had inherited, and finally makes sense of her mother’s coming to America. This novel is interestingly juxtaposed to her essay collection, *The Opposite of Faith* (2003), which reflects upon Tan’s personal experiences in relation to her family with implicit references to the novel.

Tan’s latest novel, *Saving Fish From Drowning* (2005), marks her departure from her familiar theme of mother-daughter relationships and her willingness to investigate broader social political issues such as genocide and human rights abuse in Burma, which serves as the setting of the novel. Though told with great humor and sarcasm, this work lacks the kind of critical insight and cultural familiarity manifested in Tan’s other novels. In a sense, Tan is now at a crossroads in her career regarding whether to continue to write on her familiar theme of mother-daughter relationships or to experiment with new subjects, styles, and settings.

**SEE ALSO:** Ethnicity and Fiction (AF); Postmodernist Fiction (AF)

**REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS**


YUAN SHU

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