

Amy Ruth Tan – An-mei (Blessing from America)

Early Life

Born 1952 in Oakland, CA

2nd of 3 children – 2 brothers, Peter and John

Father – John Yuehhan Tan – electrical engineer and Baptist minister, had immigrated to US in 1947.

Mother – Daisy Tu Ching Tan – Vocational nurse, immigrated in 1949.

Both immigrated to escape Chinese Civil War. They hadn't known one another in China. They met in the US and married, eventually settling in Santa Clara, CA.

Daisy had previously been married in China. She had divorced an abusive husband and lost custody of their three daughters. The only way she could get a divorce was to leave her children with her husband. She was then forced to leave the girls behind when she escaped on the last boat to leave Shanghai before the Communist takeover. Her experience later inspired Amy's book *The Kitchen God's Wife*.

Amy felt pressured to be perfect from a very young age: "My parents had high expectations. They expected me to get straight A's from the time I was in kindergarten. I remember, I was in kindergarten and there was a little girl who I didn't think was a very good artist. I thought I did a very careful house, you know, with the chimney, and the windows, and the trees, and she was more of an abstract artist. Hers was very loose, and I didn't think it was very good but they decided to pin hers up in the Principal's office. So that was like getting the 'A.' My mother wanted to know. Why wasn't my picture in that window? I was very wounded and frightened. You know? Why wasn't it in the window? I remember feeling that pressure from the time I was five years old" ("Amy Tan Interview – Academy of Achievement").

Amy's mother had had a difficult childhood herself, having seen her own mother kill herself. She also had the trauma of leaving her daughters behind in China. As a result, she herself was not a very good mother: "I remember once one of my playmates from around the corner died, probably of leukemia. My mother took me to the funeral and took me up to see Rachel. And I saw Rachel's hands clasped over her chest, and her face was bloodless, and her hands were flat, and I was scared, because this was the little girl I used to play with. My mother leaned over to me and she said, 'This is what happens when you don't listen to your mother.' According to my mother, she should have washed her fruit and she didn't. It turns out my mother might have been right. Pesticides might have led to leukemia and killed this little girl. [My mother] had been raised in an atmosphere of fear, that fear was the way to control children for their own good. That's what I grew up with" ("Amy Tan Interview – Academy of Achievement").

When Amy was 15, her older brother Peter and then her father both died of brain cancer. Her mother believed their house was evil spirited, and moved Amy and John to New York, Washington, Florida and then Switzerland, where Amy graduated high school. The family then moved back to US and settled in San Francisco.

You will be reading a short chapter called “Confessions,” in which Amy suddenly remembers a violent incident with her mother. As readers, we are quick to decide that her mother is insane. However, in an interview, Amy provides a more detailed explanation: “The year after my father and brother died, my mother took us to Europe. And there, away from everybody, away from the past, away from people who always thought I was this nerdy little girl, I exploded into a wild thing. I shortened my skirts, I put on makeup, I hung out with hippies. I got myself a first boyfriend, who was a German man, who was 24. I was 16. And it turned out, much to my delight, that he was also the father of an illegitimate child, which made him even more despicable in my mother’s eyes. Anything that my mother hated, that was better. He deserted from the German Army. I found out later, not simply from its Army but the mental hospital. My mother was convinced that this man was going to ruin me. I can tell her to this day—she still doesn’t believe this—I swear on camera that this man did nothing more than kiss me. I wasn’t that stupid. I knew he was pretty low. But it was pretty exciting. You know, first romance. This guy wrote beautiful love poetry and I just wanted to think I was special at that age. It turned out that his friends were dealing drugs: hashish or marijuana. I was a girl who went to church every single day: Bible study, choir practice, youth sessions. Suddenly I’m hanging around with these people in this environment where I know nothing about anything. I start smoking. I start drinking. People roll hashish in their cigarettes and I think that’s part of it all and I end up getting arrested” (“Amy Tan Interview – Academy of Achievement”).

Adulthood

Amy’s mother continued to be very strict and controlling. She chose Amy’s college, a Baptist school in Oregon (Linfield College), and chose her major – pre-med. Amy defied her mother by switching her major to English and transferring to San Jose State, where she earned her BA in English in 1973 and her MA in Linguistics in 1974. One reason she transferred was to be near her boyfriend, Louis DeMattei, and in 1974 they married. He is a tax attorney. They are still together today. She began work on a doctorate at Berkeley, but left to take a job as a language development specialist for disabled children. Then she became a reporter for the journal *Emergency Room Reports*, eventually becoming a managing editor and associate publisher. In 1983 she became a freelance technical writer.

She was a workaholic, so she sought relief in creative endeavors. She studied piano, and began to write fiction. Her first story was “Endgame,” which led to her admission to the Squaw Valley Writer’s Workshop.

In 1987 her mother became very ill. Amy promised her that if she recovered she would take her to China to find her daughters. Her mother miraculously recovered, and Amy fulfilled her promise. She met two of Daisy's three daughters. They were unable to locate the third daughter. The trip was a revelation for Amy. It gave her new perspective on her relationship with her mother, and inspired her to complete her first book of short stories, *The Joy Luck Club*.

The book contains 16 interrelated short stories--told by various narrators--that move back and forth in time. The stories focus on four immigrant women from China and their American born daughters. It is really a novel divided into four sections of four stories each. Each section is prefaced by a myth related to the stories in it. The first and fourth sections include the mothers' stories. The second and third sections include the daughters' stories.

The book explores the complexities of mother-daughter relationships and addresses male-female relationships from a feminist viewpoint. It was published in 1989, and became an instant bestseller (like Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*). It has been translated into 17 languages, and has received numerous awards.

Her second book, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, contains similar themes of mother-daughter relationships, dual identity, women as victims of patriarchal societies, Chinese customs, beliefs, and myths. However, it focuses on just one mother-daughter pair.

Other works include:

1992 – Children's book – *The Moon Lady*

1993 – Adapted *The Joy Luck Club* to a screenplay that was made into a movie.

1994 – *The Chinese Siamese Cat* – children's book

1995 – novel *The Hundred Secret Senses* – introduces the supernatural.

1999 – Her mother died of Alzheimer's complications and her editor died during surgery for cancer. She channeled her grief into *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, which was published in 2001.

2003 – *The Opposite of Fate* – a collection of essays (your readings come from this book).

2006 – *Saving Fish From Drowning* - novel

2012: *Rules for Virgins* - story

2014 – *The Valley of Amazement* - novel

Tan became involved in a “literary garage band” – The Rock Bottom Reminders – with Stephen King, Dave Barry and Scott Turow. They have raised over \$1 million for literacy programs (shows her humor).

In 2001 she became ill undiagnosed Lyme disease. You will be reading about her experience with this disease. She experienced hallucinations and events she couldn't recall. She lost her hair, stopped driving, and didn't leave her house alone because she'd get lost. She had become infected in 1999, but it took three years to correctly diagnose. Unfortunately, she is left with neurological problems that will never go away entirely. She continues to have good days and bad.