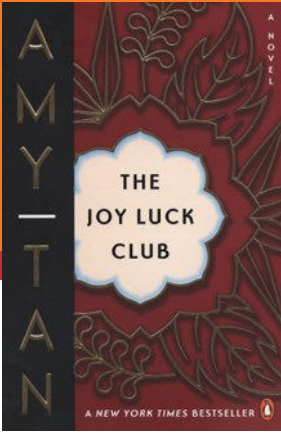


The Joy Luck Club

By Amy Tan

First published in 1989



Genre and Subject

Domestic fiction

Chinese American fiction

Mother and daughters

Synopsis

Four mothers, four daughters, four families, whose histories shift with the four winds depending on who's telling the stories. In 1949, four Chinese women, recent immigrants to San Francisco, meet weekly to play mahjong and tell stories of what they left behind in China. United in loss and new hope for their daughters' futures, they call themselves the Joy Luck Club. Their daughters, who have never heard these stories, think their mothers' advice is irrelevant to their modern American lives – until their own inner crises reveal how much they've unknowingly inherited of their mothers' pasts.

With wit and sensitivity, Amy Tan examines the sometimes painful, often tender, and always deep connection between mothers and daughters. As each woman reveals her secrets, trying to unravel the truth about her life, the strings become more tangled, more entwined. Mothers boast or despair over daughters, and daughters roll their eyes even as they feel the inextricable tightening of their matriarchal ties. Tan is an astute storyteller, enticing readers to immerse themselves into these lives of complexity and mystery.

Author Biography

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California in 1952, two and a half years after her parents emigrated to the US. Though her parents hoped she would become a neurosurgeon by trade and a concert pianist by hobby, instead she became an administrator of programmes for disabled children and later a reporter and editor. She visited China for the first time in 1987 and found it was just how her mother had said: 'As soon as my feet touched China, I became Chinese.' Amy Tan lives in San Francisco with her husband.

Discussion Starters

1. Although the women in *The Joy Luck Club* are Chinese or Chinese American, and their heritage plays an important part in their lives, they also have experiences that all of us face, regardless of culture, even today. They struggle with raising their children, contend with unhappy marriages, cope with difficult financial circumstances, and are disheartened by bad luck. Which of the eight main characters did you identify with the most? Why?
2. When Jing-mei's aunties tell her about her sisters, they insist that she travel to China to see them, to tell them about their mother. They are taken aback when Jing-mei responds. "What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything. She was my mother" (p. 36). Jing-mei thinks that the reason this upsets the aunties is that it makes them fear that they may not know their own daughters either. How does this exchange set the stage for the stories that follow? To what extent do you think that Jing-mei is right? How well do any of the mothers and daughters know each other in this book?
3. Discuss the topic of marriage as it is represented in *The Joy Luck Club*. Each of the women faces difficult choices when it comes to marrying—whether it be Lindo Jong being forced into an early union with a man she loathes, Ying-Ying St. Clair starting life over with an American man after being abandoned by her first husband, or Rose Hsu Jordan, who is facing divorce from a man whose family never understood her. How are the daughters' romantic choices influenced, if at all, by their mothers, who had fewer choices of their own?
4. When she is young, Waverly Jong is a chess prodigy. It is a common conception in the United States that young Asian children are more driven than their peers and more likely to excel because their parents demand more of them. However, it is Waverly's mother who influences Waverly to quit chess, due to a hurtful argument. What do you think of mother and daughter's reactions to this event?
5. While Waverly was a prodigy and grew up to be successful in her career, Jing-mei (or "June" as she is called in America) has had more difficulty. Her parents also wished for her to be a "genius," as if hard work alone could will it. Using Jing-mei Woo's chapter "Best Quality" (p. 221) as a platform, discuss the differences between the daughters of the members of the Joy Luck Club. What does the dinner scene between Waverly and June say about each of their characters? How is their behavior influenced by family and culture?
6. Throughout their stories, the women in *The Joy Luck Club* and their daughters exhibit many signs, at different moments, of both strength and weakness. On page 170, when Lena St. Clair is describing her relationship with Harold, she claims that "I think I deserve someone like Harold, and I mean in the good sense and not like bad karma. We're equals." Knowing what you do about Lena and Harold's relationship, do you think that's true? Does a thought like this represent strength or weakness on Lena's part? What are some other moments of strength and weakness, both major and minor, that you can identify in the women in this book?
7. The title of the book, *The Joy Luck Club*, is taken from Suyuan Woo's establishment of a gathering between women, first in China, and later in San Francisco. The club has been maintained for many years and undergone many changes since its inception—for instance, the husbands of the women now attend, and they pool their money to buy stock instead of relying only on their mahjong winnings. What do you think is the significance of these meetings to the women who attend them? Why do you think these four families have continued to come together like this after so much time has passed?

8. In Rose Hsu Jordan's story, "Half and Half," a terrible tragedy befalls her youngest brother Bing while she is watching him. At first she is fearful that her parents will be angry with her, but instead her mother relies on both her Christian faith and Chinese beliefs in ancestor worship. Do you think that Rose's mother, An-mei, truly lost her faith that day when they lost Bing?

9. Suyuan Woo is the only member of the Joy Luck Club who does not have her own voice in this book—she died a few months before the story begins. Why do you think the author made that choice? Why is it significant that her daughter is the main narrator, and that it is the story of her lost daughters in Kweilin that serve as a beginning and end to the book?

10. Amy Tan's work has been highly anthologized for students, and her books, especially *The Joy Luck Club*, are read in more than thirty countries around the world. Why do you think this book has such a universal appeal? What are some of the elements of the plot and aspects of the characters that make so many different kinds of people want to read it?

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