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| |  | | --- | | Amy Tan |  |  | | --- | | **Interview: Amy Tan Best-Selling Novelist**  **Academy of Achievement**  June 28, 1996 Sun Valley, Idaho |   **Did you know what you wanted to do with your life or did it just happen?**  Amy Tan: I was told what I was supposed to do when I was growing up, so I don't think I ever had a chance to think about what I really wanted to do. Deep down, I wanted to be an artist but I knew you couldn't make any money being an artist. That was just play. My parents told me I would become a doctor and then in my spare time I would become a concert pianist. So, both my day job and my spare time were sort of taken care of. It terrified me when I got to wondering if that was something I really could do. I wasn't that good a pianist and I didn't know if I really wanted to help people who were sick and had diseases. I didn't know if that was really in me, let alone if I could pass a science course.  **When did you know you wanted to become a writer? Was there a defining moment?**  Amy Tan: I did some writing in class when I was young just as everybody did. I had to write little essays and things like that.  *I wrote an essay called "What the Library Means to Me" when I was eight years old. It was very simple. It said things like "My name is Amy Tan. I'm a third grader at Matanzas School." And then I did what my father always did. He was a minister. I tried to be very sincere, sort of go for the emotion, you know, about how the library is a friend. And this really all was very sincere, but at the end (this is why I think I won this essay contest), I made a pitch for money which, of course, is what ministers do at the end of their talks. And I said how I had given (I think it was) 17 cents, which was my entire life savings at age eight, to the Citizens for Santa Rosa Library, and that I hoped that others would do the same. And so they decided to give me the award. They published my little essay and they gave me a transistor radio and, at that moment, there was a little gleam in mind that maybe writing could be lucrative.*  I kind of forgot about that later. My parents said, "You're going to be a doctor." It wasn't until I was 33 years old that I started writing fiction.  **That raises a lot of questions. How do you deal with parental expectations?**  Amy Tan: Boy, that is such a tough one. I look back as an adult now, and I say, "They only wanted the best for you." But at the same time I try to remember. This is what I try to do as a writer, I try to remember what those emotions were like when I was younger. They just didn't understand. They didn't know who I really was. They didn't know how much the smallest amount of recognition would have meant to me and how the smallest amount of criticism could undo me.  *My parents had very 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 5 years old.*  My mother had a very difficult childhood, having seen her own mother kill herself. So she didn't always know how to be the nurturing mother that we all expect we should have.  *I remember once one of my playmates from around the corner died, probably of leukemia. My mother took me to this 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."*  Talk about pressure. Here was a little girl who didn't listen to her 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 this theory back in the 1950s. That's what she really meant. She 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 Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-010)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-010) |   Now, growing up in an American culture, of course, I also had other models. I had playmates with parents who thought, "Hey, they got a "C," who cares? That was great, Billy. Here's money. Go get a candy bar." If I came home with one "B," I didn't get anything. I got scolded for that one "B."  So I grew up thinking that I would never, ever please my parents. That is a difficult thing to grow up with. High-achieving kids go through some aspect of that, whether it comes from their parents or their teachers or themselves. It's an implied sense of their worth being determined by others. It's a horrible feeling, especially when you experience what you think is your first failure and you think your life is over. No more chances.  If you blew it -- you got a "D" on something because you stayed up all night or you weren't feeling well and you took the test and you got a "D" -- that was it. My mother actually believes that my older brother's life was devastated by something similar to that.  *He was a straight "A" student, brilliant, was going to graduate at age 16. And a friend asked if he could look at his paper, some English paper. He had written a paper on The Loved One or something like that. This friend copied his essay word-for-word and the teacher failed both of them, not just for the paper but for the semester, as though he was going to teach them a lesson. I thought the lesson he taught my brother was a total disillusionment about the consequences that are meted out in life. I suppose if my brother had become older it would have transmogrified into something different and made it a strength in his life, a turning point. He despaired, and he went into depression and he began to sleep a lot. A few months later, he began to have headaches and a few weeks later he began to have convulsions and a few weeks after that he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. My mother believes, to this day, that that incident in his life caused his illness.*  Now, I don't think that necessarily is the case but I think these failures can have a profound affect on us. Oftentimes parents or teachers don't realize how these very things that seem little -- a little praise, a little criticism, a little failure -- can create such enormous turmoil in a young person's life.  **Were there any teachers who inspired you, challenged you, opened up new possibilities for you? Did you have any role models?**  Amy Tan: I remember all of my teachers. I think of them all as being very kind and dedicated. I remember one teacher in particular.  *I was in a school in the third grade and they were thinking of skipping me, putting me in a higher grade. But then somebody said that would be bad psychologically. So, for that entire year, because I had learned all the lessons that year -- the multiplication tables, whatever the reading was -- this teacher let me go off by myself and draw pictures. So I had hours and hours of time where I was just left to my own devices, drawing pictures. And she would encourage me. That was a wonderful period in my life. I mean, I didn't become an artist, but somebody let me do something I loved. What a luxury, to do something you love to do.*  I would still like to have that luxury, to be able to just sit and draw for hours and hours and hours. In a way, that's what I do as a writer. I just sit by myself, being in my own mind, not being directed at what I should be doing moment-by-moment, not having a clear plan set out by anybody and just letting imagination enter into the blank page. So in that respect, I can thank Miss Grudoff of the third grade for allowing me that.  **What was your attraction to reading, to literature and to writing? What drew you to literature when it was not part of your family life?**  *Amy Tan: Reading for me was a refuge. I could escape from everything that was miserable in my life and I could be anyone I wanted to be in a story, through a character. It was almost sinful how much I liked it. That's how I felt about it. If my parents knew how much I loved it, I thought they would take it away from me. I think I was also blessed with a very wild imagination because I can remember, when I was at an age before I could read, that I could imagine things that weren't real and whatever my imagination saw is what I actually saw. Some people would say that was psychosis but I prefer to say it was the beginning of a writer's imagination. If I believed that insects had eyes and mouths and noses and could talk, that's what they did. If I thought I could see devils dancing out of the ground, that's what I saw. If I thought lightning had eyes and would follow me and strike me down, that's what would happen. And I think I needed an outlet for all that imagination, so I found it in books.*  I also grew up, thankfully, with a love of language. That may have happened because I was bilingual at an early age. I stopped speaking Chinese when I was five, but I loved words. Words to me were magic. You could say a word and it could conjure up all kinds of images or feelings or a chilly sensation or whatever. It was amazing to me that words had this power.  I don't know where I got that feeling. Possibly from my father, since he was a minister. He could say words in church and make people go up there and pledge ten percent of their money. That was powerful. As a writer, you do the same thing today. You write a book and you hope somebody will go out and pay $24.95 for what you've just said. I think books were my salvation. Books saved me from being miserable.  **Were there any particular books that inspired you?**  *Amy Tan: I loved fairy tales when I was a kid. Grimm. The grimmer the better. I loved gruesome gothic tales and, in that respect, I liked Bible stories, because to me they were very gothic. It's very gothic to have a little boy killing a giant, somebody's head being served on a platter, dead people being raised out of the grave, things like that. Also, because the rhythms, the prose style of the Bible is, of course, very influential, has been very influential on many writers. So as stories, I loved fairy tales. Anything that had a degree of the fantastic. I suppose what some people would call today "magical realism."*  Later, I loved all the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, *Little House on the Prairie, Little House in the Big Woods, By the Shore of Silver Lake.*I read all of those. And then I felt very grown up when I was able to read *To Kill a Mockingbird.*I was only about 10 years old. I was trying very hard to see if I understood the whole book, because it had a lot of big words in it. I tried to read more adult books around then.  I read a book a day when I was a kid. My family was not literary; we did not have any books in the house. I remember we were given one book of Chinese fairy tales when I was about eight years old. The other books we had in the house, besides Bibles and medical textbooks of physical anomalies, were the World Book Encyclopedia and Readers Digest Condensed Books that had been discarded by various people. That's what I grew up with.  I meet writers these days. I remember one who sat at the foot of Thomas Mann and was reading Flaubert in French when she was 15. I wonder what kind of writer I would have been if I had had that kind of privileged upbringing. I don't regret it at all. I grew up in a family that didn't speak English that well. A lot of people couldn't understand my mother. Nobody really cared that much about literature, although my father was a natural storyteller, being a minister.  *There was a lot of storytelling going on in our house: family stories, gossip, what happened to the people left behind in China. The gossip about people's character that went around as my aunt and my mother shelled peas on the dining table covered with newspaper. Overhearing things being said in Chinese that I wasn't supposed to understand -- which is the only reason I understand some Shanghainese and Mandarin. And being told there were certain books I couldn't read, which made me go out deliberately and find those books.*  The forbidden things were a great influence on my life. I was forbidden from reading *A Catcher in the Rye.*  *I was forbidden from reading the Harrad Experiment and also a book called Psychopathia Sexualis, a Kraft-Ebbing text from the 19th century. When it was discovered that I was reading this, my parents called in the family minister to counsel me, actually, the youth minister. The Youth Minister said how this would corrupt my mind and I would go insane and all this kind of stuff. We were seated in my parents' bedroom on my parents' bed. And, I have to tell you, what was so profound about that is that here this man, who I was supposed to trust, was telling me about these things and suddenly he saw that I was very sad because, at the same time, my father was in the hospital dying. So he said, "Cheer up, it's not that bad." And he threw me on the bed and he started to tickle me. Now even at that young age, being very innocent, I knew that what he was doing was wrong. And he would not stop. I found out later that he had seduced a young girl, left his wife and ran off with a 16-year old. Because of that, it has also made me hate... I cannot stand being tickled to this day. It made me disbelieve everything he had to say about books being bad for you. I was intelligent enough to make up my own mind. I not only had freedom of choice, I had freedom of expression.*  I think that, in part, also made me a writer, a certain stubborn streak. I'm not advocating disobedience to authority in general -- because that doesn't necessarily lead to anything -- but knowing the difference between your own intelligence and somebody handing you a set of things you should believe. It's important to understand their motivations, their intentions, where those beliefs derive from and then having a set of questions to make sure that what they give to you is equally important and meaningful to you.  As a result of that, I'm a very strong advocate for freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and the danger of banning books. The danger is in creating the idea that somebody else is going to define the purpose of literature and confine who has access to it.  **What kind of a kid were you? How would you describe yourself?**  Amy Tan: It's hard for me to say objectively. I ask people now and they say, "You were a great kid, you were so well-behaved." That's because now I have achieved a certain kind of success so they remember things differently. Their memory is warped. I have a writer's memory which makes everything worse than maybe it actually was.   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-011)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-011) |   I think I was a gloomy kid. I was trying to behave, trying to be good. I really loved my father. He was my mentor in a way, so I wanted to please him a lot. My mother said I was a clingy kid until I was about four. I also remember that from the age of eight she and I fought almost every day. I remember that starting at the age of six I had thoughts of suicide. My first suicide attempt was with a butter knife. It hurt and then I stopped. The fact that I had those thoughts when I was very young was an indication that I was a very gloomy kid. I had some ways of thinking that were not healthy.  I loved to read. I was solitary and later I became a rebellious kid. There is one side of me that wanted to behave and to hear a voice that was God's voice saying, "Amy, I have a mission for you. You are going to go out and save this country." On the other hand, I wanted to go out and be a rebel and wind up in jail, which is what I almost did.  I think the rebellious side came about because I thought I was never going to hear the voice of God. I'd never be good enough for God or for my family or for my mother or father so I might as well be bad. And that I could succeed in.  *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 somebody 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.  This was a moment when I thought for sure my life was over. I think I understand kids who have made a few mistakes. They're relying on everybody else's opinion of who they are. They can't change the fact that they made this really stupid mistake, so they are just going to keep going that way. "You think I'm bad now? I can be really bad." That's the direction I could have taken. Fortunately, I didn't.  I had a chance, for one thing, to move away and not tell anybody what had happened. To start over again. It's wonderful to be able to look back and kind of talk about that humorously but I tell you it was a horrible, horrible time. I thought my life was over then, that all chances of ever going to college -- of having a decent life, of being respected -- were gone.  **What pulled you through? How did you get in a position to do something with your life?**  *Amy Tan: I reached a point where I had infuriated my mother so much we nearly killed each other. Literally. And I was sick to my stomach, literally. I had dry heaves, and the pain was so enormous that at one point, when I thought I was going to die, I just suddenly realized that that scared me. And it was scary to live but it was scarier to die. I remember just saying, "I want to live, I want to live, I want to live." Some strength -- it's hard to describe what it is, you know? You just start to pull through.*   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-009)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-009) |   I still did a lot of things out of anger for a while. I was lucky that I met a very kind person, a very good person and that person is now my husband. He is a very sweet man. I wasn't in love with him when I first met him, but I knew he was a good person. I said, "This is the kind of person my father was." Four years later I married Lou and we have been together ever since. We have been together for 26 years. He's been my stability in life.  I also learned to forgive myself, and that enabled me to forgive my mother as a person. She wasn't a perfect mother, but a lot of the things she did, she really did do out of love. Maybe they weren't the right things to do, but it really was out of love. Once I realized that and stopped taking it as a personal attack to torture me and make my life miserable, then I could look beyond it. I could even look at it with some humor eventually.  It's not as though I came to one crisis, overcame that, and the rest of my life was smooth and perfect. Life is a continual series of bumps and crises. You think you're never going to get over a hurdle, and you get over it. You enter into what one writer, Richard Ford, calls the "period of existence." That's when you survive. You can look back on what's just happened and you make sense of it and grow, or you stagnate or you go back down, but it's your period of existence. The hurdles and conflicts are really momentary. You get over them and you see what happens afterwards.  **Do you think your conflicts with your mother were really over generational issues, or cultural issues, or both?**   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-014)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-014) |   Amy Tan: I think the conflicts were both cultural and generational. They are cultural if you're raised bi-culturally and, in this day and age, who's not? Even if you're not, if your family is of one culture, you are around people of many different cultures. So you see different cultural expectations going on all around you.  I think the cultural issues can sometimes confuse the generational ones. I'll give you an example. If my mother didn't want me to date boys out of fear that somehow I would lose myself to this boy and ruin my life, I chalked up all of her fears to Chinese fears, not generational ones. Anything that was unreasonable, I said was Chinese so I made the culture the scapegoat. That's unfortunate, because it made me grow up wanting to deny that part of my family, of myself. Anything that was Chinese about me made me feel ashamed. I wanted to bury it so that what I thought was the stronger, more independent, American side could come out.  I realize now that some of the stuff that happened to me was simply the uniqueness of my family and my mother. It had nothing to do with Chinese culture. Some of it, yes, was rooted inside traditions of Chinese culture, like the use of fear in old families to keep children under control. But I think any mother worries about her daughter losing herself to some boy and ruining her life. So there was a mix of things.  **What advice do you have for kids of essentially bi-cultural parents, for American kids growing up in America with parents who were either born in another country or are themselves of the first generation in this country?**  Amy Tan: I would say first, you are not alone. I thought I was and I didn't realize it until I wrote *The Joy Luck Club.* I had so many readers who said, "I feel as though you've written my life. That was how I felt."   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-013)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-013) |   I thought, "Well, that's probably what happened to people who grew up in the '50s and '60s and it's probably not happening today because we have progressed beyond that in the United States." But, no. I have a lot of young people coming up to me and saying "That's how I felt. That's how I still feel. I don't get along with my mother and I'm the only kid in an all-white community. And, "I feel like I don't know if I'm Chinese." "Am I American? Am I Korean? What should I be? How should I feel about this?"  It's hard to believe, but this feeling changes over time. So many people feel this way. It's normal to feel conflicted. What you'll find ultimately is that this whole question of who you are is a very, very interesting question and having two cultures to add to the mix of it makes it even more interesting.  The strange thing is, if you ever have a chance to go back to the country of your parents or your ancestors, you'll find out, not how Chinese or Korean, or Indian you are, you'll find out how American you are. You'll find out how many American assumptions you have and it will give you a sense of perspective and humor about the whole idea that identity is what you create. It's not foisted upon you. You are presented with circumstances in life and those circumstances change very rapidly.  I said to myself when I was 17, "I'm not going to have anything to do with anything Chinese when I leave home. I'm going to be completely American." None of that Chinese torture or guilt ever again in my life. None of that responsibility crap, "You owe it to your family. You have to do this for your family." I was never going to speak to my mother again. She was disappointed in me? Well, I wasn't going to be around to disappoint her anymore.  *So if you were to say to me when I was 17, "You know, one day you're going to write a book about Chinese people and about your relationship with you mother and how much you love your mother," and all this stuff, I would have said "You are crazy. You are absolutely crazy. There is no way I would ever do that." Those are the kinds of surprising changes that you can have in your life. Just be open to it and never let yourself despair that this is it. This is the way it's always going to be. I'm never going to get along with my parents, never going to feel accepted by the other kids, never going to make it because I'm going to be held back with this enormous burden of -- something or other -- pressure, not being good enough. God, life changes faster than you think.*  **How did you finally get started writing fiction?**  Amy Tan: I actually started doing some other kinds of writing before I wrote the fiction.  *I was writing for businesses. I think my mother was a little skeptical in the beginning, but fortunately, as a free-lance writer I was successful almost immediately. And so she was very proud, because she measured success in terms of money, which is what I started to do as well. My goal then, became to increase the amount of money that I made each month. Not simply each year, but each month -- I mean, talk about pressure -- to have more billable hours each month. So that by the end of my third year of being a free-lance writer, I was billing 90 hours a week. I had no time to sleep. I had no life. People said I was crazy, that I was a workaholic. And I couldn't understand how it was that I had these wonderful clients, and I was making all this money, and I wasn't happy and I didn't feel successful. That's when I started to write fiction.*  It didn't matter to my mother that I was writing fiction, because I still had the job. I made it a goal however, to cut back and work only 50 billable hours a week. No one in my family was a reader of literary fiction. So, I didn't have encouragement, but I didn't have discouragement, because I don't think anybody knew what that meant.  **Was there anyone who gave you a first big break? How did you get started in your career?**  Amy Tan: I would say that half of it was adversity. It was people discouraging me that got me into writing.  *I had a partner, a business partner, who ended up cheating me, as a matter of fact. We had signed some papers to have this business together and I worked many long hours and one day we had a disagreement and I said I wanted to do more writing and he said that my strength was in project management. That was like taking care of clients, doing estimates, going after contractors and collecting bills. Horrible stuff. I'm not good at that. I hate that kind of thing. He said, "That's your strength. Writing is your weakest skill." I thought, I can either believe him and just keep doing this... I disagreed with him a little bit more forcefully and I said that I get to decide too, because I'm a partner in this. He said, "No you're not," and I said, "What do you mean no, I'm not?" and he said "I never signed the papers." At that point I said I was quitting and he said "You can't quit. I'm firing you." I said, "Go ahead. Fire me." You know, this is my adversity, this is a low point in my life. He said, "So what do you think you're going to do?" I said "I'm going to freelance write." He said, "Oh, fat chance. You'll be lucky if you make a dime."*  With that sendoff into the world, I was determined to make it as a writer. I worked day and night trying to build my business, writing a business plan and thinking of how I could do this. So in that sense, it was adversity that made me force myself to be successful in that kind of business writing.   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-012)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-012) |   As for the other writing, fiction writing, there are so many people. In part, I would say it's people I don't even know. Sometimes I think it's the ghost of my grandmother, the spirit of my grandmother. She never had a life of her own. She never had choices of her own. She was raped and forced to become a concubine. She killed herself because she had no other way to escape. She had no choice in the kind of life she was given because she could not make her own living. I think she said, "You have this choice and you can change the past. You can do all these things."  At the time I was doing business writing, I also had a friend who introduced me to a fiction writer. My friend said that I could meet this woman and tell her how to make some real money. Instead, I said to the woman that I had been thinking of doing some fiction writing myself. "If I wrote something, would you read it?" I recall this now, laughing, because it's the question I hate hearing the most. Oh, my God, here is somebody who is just starting out and it's going to be dreadful. You're going to have to encourage them and try to help them and still be truthful. She was wonderful. She read my stuff and she was very gentle and also very encouraging. So I kept writing.  **What turned you to fiction? What's the genesis of *The Joy Luck Club?***  Amy Tan: I wanted to write stories for myself. At first it was purely an aesthetic thing about craft. I just wanted to become good at the art of something. And writing was very private. I also thought of playing improvisational jazz and I did take lessons for a while. At first I tried to write fiction by making up things that were completely alien to my life. I wrote about a girl whose parents were educated, were professors at MIT. There was no Joy Luck Club, it was the country club. I tried to copy somebody's style that I thought was very clever. I thought I was clever enough to write as well as these people and I didn't realize that there is something called originality and your own voice.  *One day, after being told one of these stories didn't work, I thought, "I'm just going to stop showing my work to people, and I'm just going to write a story. Make it fictional, but they'll be Chinese-American." What amazed me was: I wrote about a girl who plays chess and her mother is both her worst adversary and her best ally. I didn't play chess, so I figured that counted for fiction, but I made her Chinese-American, which made me a little uncomfortable. By the end of this story I was practically crying. Because I realized that -- although it was fiction and none of that had ever happened to me in that story -- it was the closest thing of describing my life. Of the feelings that I had, of these things that my mother had taught me that were inexplicable or had no name. This invisible force that she taught me, this rebellion that I had. And then feeling that I had lost some power, lost her approval and then lost what had made me special. It was a magic turning point for me. I realized that was the reason for writing fiction. Through that, this subversion of myself, of creating something that never happened, I came closer to the truth. So, to me, fiction became a process of discovering what was true, for me. Only for me.*  I went to a writer's workshop. I met a wonderful writer there named Molly Giles. She looked at my work and said, "Where's the voice? Where's the story? There's so many things that are happening that are not working, but there's a possible beginning. If I were you, I would start over again and take each one of these and make that your story. You don't have one story here, you have 12 stories. 16 stories." She was right because those 16 stories became *The Joy Luck Club.*  I was at a stage where that kind of criticism didn't dishearten me at all. It made me so excited because she had said it in the most constructive way -- not simply saying, "This isn't working, this is bad, this is nothing." She said, "Look at this. Here you have a voice, and it's inconsistent with this voice, but it's an interesting voice. So maybe you should think about this question, what is your voice?" That's a question I still ask myself today as a writer.  *I had an agent who, by luck, read my stuff in a little magazine and wanted to be my agent. Believed in me as a fiction writer before I ever believed in myself. In fact, I told her, when she wanted to be my agent. I said, "I'm not really a fiction writer. I don't need an agent. But if I ever write anything else, maybe ten years from now, I'll let you know." She pursued me and she kept saying, "You have to write more fiction." I said, "I can't pay you anything." She said "I'm by commission. You don't have to pay anything until you sell anything." I said, "Well fine. You want to be my agent and not make anything." I thought, "Boy, is she dumb." She hounded me until I wrote a couple more stories and then she sold that as a collection called The Joy Luck Club.*  **You've spoken of another turning point. In 1987 you traveled with your mother to China, where you had never been. What did you learn from that trip that was so important to you?**  Amy Tan: I took this trip to China as a way of fulfilling a promise. I thought my mother was going to die and I had sworn to God and Buddha and whatever spirits are out there that I would do this if she lived. And by God the little mother pulled through, so I went to China.  I was nervous about it because it meant three weeks with my mother, and I had hardly spent more than a couple of hours alone with her in the last 20 years. So it was a chance for me to really see what was inside of me and my mother. Most importantly, I wanted to know about her past. I wanted to see where she had lived, I wanted to see the family members that had raised her, the daughters she had left behind. The daughters could have been me, or I could have been them.   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-008)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-008) |   And I did see all of those things, and even more. I discovered how American I was. I also discovered how Chinese I was by the kind of family habits and routines that were so familiar. I discovered a sense of finally belonging to a period of history which I never felt with American history.  When you read about the Civil War, a lot of people, like my husband, can say my great-great-grandfather fought in that war. We have the gun and all that kind of stuff. I have a good imagination, but I could never imagine my ancestors having been in any of this history because my parents came to this country in 1949. So none of that history before then seemed relevant to me. It was wonderful going to a country where suddenly the landscape, the geography, the history was relevant. That was enormously important to me.  It doesn't necessarily have to be that way for everybody, but for me it was extremely important because I had spent so long denying that side of me. In fact, one of the subjects I hated the most was history. I thought it was completely a waste of time. It had absolutely no relevance. Today, I love history. I find it is absolutely relevant to everything that is going on. It's not just some philosophical babble of how things repeat themselves. You see the undercurrents of change and culture and that is history. It's those behaviors that are important. History really is a record of behaviors and intentions and actions and consequences.  So, I think going to China was a turning point. I couldn't have written *The Joy Luck Club* without having been there, without having felt that spiritual sense of geography.  **Was it also a turning point in your relationship with your mother?**  Amy Tan: Oh yes. For example...  *I used to think that my mother got into arguments with people because they didn't understand her English, because she was Chinese. And I saw in China that she got in arguments with Chinese people. She was just as difficult in China as she was in America. I had to laugh about that. There are so many things that I could laugh about and see that my sisters were the same way, that we had inherited things from my mother. But there were differences as well. And my sisters, who had grown up thinking that they had been denied this wonderful, loving, nurturing mother who would have understood everything and been sweet and kind and never would have criticized them. Well suddenly they were shocked to find this mother saying, "You didn't cook this long enough," or "This is too salty," and "Why do you wear that? It makes you look terrible." They were shocked too. It had nothing to do with being American. They were daughters, also wanting their mother's approval, and didn't understand why their mother was so critical.*  So I saw my mother in a different light. We all need to do that. You have to be displaced from what's comfortable and routine, and then you get to see things with fresh eyes, with new eyes. The new eyes can be very useful in breaking habits of relationships, the old irritations, the patterns of avoidance. You start talking about things. You still get into fights but you learn to just pick what's important and say, you know, it's not so important really for me to win this one. Really, what my mother wants is for me to think that what she has to say is valuable. That's all.  **Then there was *The Joy Luck Club* and endless weeks on the bestseller list. Many people are smart and have talent and potential. Why do you think it is that you succeeded, when not everybody does?**  [[http://www.achievement.org/library/bookcovers/JoyLuckClu_0.gif](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/bibliography/JoyLuckClu_0)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/bibliography/JoyLuckClu_0)  Amy Tan: You know, I get asked that question a lot and I never know the answer. The answer keeps changing. Sometimes I think that it's pure luck, I won the lottery. Sometimes I think it's because I'm a Baby-Boomer and what I wrote about are very normal emotions and conflicts that many people have, so somehow it struck a universal chord.  I think that I was in the right time and the right place. I met the right people, who were passionate about my work and, thus, able to get it in front of people who would sell the book in bookstores, readers who would pass the word along to their mothers or daughters or friends. I think it's all of that.  I also begin to think there are things in life that we don't understand, that are a mystery. I give credit to something beyond me. I'm not sure what that is exactly, except I think it's a very benevolent force.  A lot of bad things have happened in my life. I never believed the sort of pap that ministers would say. You know, "Bad things happen for certain reasons. God decided to take your brother at this time for a reason." I thought, "Bullshit, why would somebody allow such pain to happen to anybody?" It's so difficult. We don't have words to explain why things happen and you can't couch them in terms like that and explain them at the moment that they happen. It's only later that you see what the connections might have been and how it led to something.  I think that's why I'm a storyteller. I take all these disparate events and I have to connect them. I have to make them seem inevitable and yet surprising and plausible. That's what I think life is like, too. I have the luxury to do exactly what it is we all need time to do, and that is just think about the mystery of life.  **Speaking now only of your writing career, what setbacks or detours have you had along the way and how have you dealt with them and learned from them? Self-doubts, fear of failure?**  *Amy Tan: I didn't fear failure. I expected failure. I think I've always been somebody, since the deaths of my father and brother, who was afraid to hope. So, I was more prepared for failure and for rejection than success. The success took me by surprise and it frightened me. On the day that there was a publication party for my book, I spent the whole day crying. I was scared out of my mind that my life was changing and it was out of my control and I didn't know why it was happening. I thought it would ruin things, because at that moment in my life I was fairly happy. I was getting along with my mother. My husband and I had been married for a long time, we were happy, we had our first house, we had great friends, we were doing well, we weren't starving. We had a comfortable living and I thought, "Things are going to get messed up here and I have no control over this." I could already see how people were treating me differently. That's the scary thing. You know, when people say, "How has success changed you?" you have to say, "No. How have people changed toward you as the result of success?" And "How have you dealt with that change in how people have changed toward you?" That's the most difficult thing.*  So I went through a terrible period of feeling that I had lost my privacy, that I had lost a sense of who I was. I was scared by the way people measured everything by numbers: where I was on a list, or how many weeks, or how many books I had sold. By the time it came to the second book, I was so freaked out, I broke out in hives. I couldn't sleep at night. I broke three teeth grinding my teeth. I had backaches. I had to go to physical therapy. I was a wreck!  *I started a second novel seven times and I had to throw them away. You know, 100 pages here, 200 pages there and I'd say, "Is this what they liked in The Joy Luck Club? Is this the style, is this the story? No, I must write something completely different. I must write no Chinese characters to prove that I'm multi-talented." Or "No, I must write this way in a very erudite way to show I have a way to use big words." It's both rebellion and conformity that attack you with success. It took me a long time to get over that, and just finally being able to breathe again and say, "What's important? Why are you a writer? Why did you write that book in the first place? What did you learn? What did you discover? What was the most rewarding part of that?"*  Don't think of what's going to happen afterwards. If it's a failure, will you think what you wrote was a failure, that the whole time was wasted? If it's a success, will you think the words are more valuable?  That crisis helped me to define what was important for me. It started off with family. It started off with knowing myself, with knowing the things I wanted as a constant in my life: trust, love, kindness, a sense of appreciation, gratitude. I didn't want to become cynical. I didn't want to become a suspicious person. Those were the things that helped me decide what I was going to write.  My mother, meanwhile, all the time kept saying, "Write my true story. That's all you have to do. Write my true story." I kept saying, "No, that's not fiction. I'm not writing biography."  *Writing is an extreme privilege but it's also a gift. It's a gift to yourself and it's a gift of giving a story to someone. What better gift can I give my mother than to finally sit down and listen to her entire story, hour after hour after hour? She's very repetitive. This is hard work, listening to her say the same laments in her life over and over again, but this time asking for more details. Getting this story out, I realized, was a gift that she was giving me. And there was a gift I could give back to her, and it didn't matter what happened to that book afterwards. If it didn't sell a single copy, if it was panned, that whole time I spent writing it, getting to know my mother, getting to know myself, all of it was worth it. Nobody -- no review, no place on a list -- could take that away from me or make it more important than what it already was.*  I still have to think about that over and over again, with everything I do in life. It's so easy to get derailed by success. You get distracted. You get opportunities. If I look back ten years ago, fifteen years ago, I would not be able to believe that I would be saying, "No, I don't want to make another movie. No, I don't want to do a TV series." You can get sucked into the idea that, "Gosh, this is impressive. Maybe I should do this. It will look good." Or "I'll write like this because it will impress that critic."  *I think a lot about death because of what's happened in my life. And I like to hope that there is something after death. And I like to hope that if there is something afterwards, the people I love will be there. So, I say, "If I die, who's going to be waiting for me on the other side -- that critic, or that movie producer, or that TV exec? Or is it going to be my mother and my husband and my brother?" Gosh, it simplifies things a whole lot. It's just crystal clear what's important.*  **No matter what field you're in, you can't please all of the people all of the time. How are you affected by criticism, and how do you deal with it?**  Amy Tan: The question for me is, "How am I affected by praise?" I am more fearful of praise these days because I don't want to depend upon it. In the world of book publishing, there is never a comfortable balance point where you either have enough praise or enough criticism. If you get this kind of review then you worry about what's going to happen with the next. So there's never any comfort point.  On the other hand, I welcome criticism when I'm writing my books. I want to become better and better as a writer. I go to a writer's group every week. We read our work aloud. They're old friends, and they treat me as an equal in the group, meaning they tear my stuff apart like anybody else's.  What I fear most is taking the criticism too seriously, the negative criticism or the extremely positive reviews, and not knowing which one I should believe. It's the worst ones that stick in my mind. It's like a little mantra I hear: "Not interesting, not interesting, not interesting." I lie awake thinking about this and trying to block it out of my mind. It's like cat pee on the pillow, you just can't get it out.  [[http://www.achievement.org/library/bookcovers/KitchenGod_0.gif](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/bibliography/KitchenGod_0)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/bibliography/KitchenGod_0)  I also worry about those who praise my work for what I think are the wrong reasons. They think I have done something mystical or wise, or that I've demystified Chinese culture, and I wasn't trying to do any of those things. Or people will say I've done a great service in helping with generational gaps. I don't think of my work as being therapeutic or sociological or psychological. It's not educational. I think the closest it comes to is simply being storytelling for others. For myself, it's very personal. So I have a hard time accepting what is said about my work when it's taken apart.  After a number of years of going crazy over this, I don't read any of the reviews. I don't read the interviews and I don't watch the television tapes people send me. Radio tapes? Newspaper clippings? I don't read it. I do look at the photos of myself and see how I age each year, and how my hairstyle changes, but I try not to take any of that stuff seriously, because I'm afraid of then contouring my life, which is my writing, my self, toward those reactions, and I don't want to lead a reactionary life.  **What personal characteristics do you think are most important for achievement, for success?**  Amy Tan: I'm the worst at coming up with the single word, which is the reason why I write novels. I've never been good at multiple choice questions or true/false things because I always want to tell a story. I always want to give exceptions to the rule.  What comes to mind is what I think about with my nieces. They are very, very smart and they have a very smart mother and they are so afraid to be wrong. These little girls, they're only eight and six and they are already so afraid to be wrong. There are a lot of people who think that's what's needed to be successful is always being right, always being careful, always picking the right path.   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-001)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-001) |   I think self-knowledge is important and that embraces so many things. It means that when you make a mistake, you realize what it is but you don't beat yourself over the head for it and you don't try to cast blame on somebody else. You don't say, "Life's not fair, I worked hard for this. I deserve this." Finding a sense of balance and a philosophy that can keep you consistent on one level when life is going to be one hell of a bumpy and exciting road -- that's important!  I think a spirit of generosity and kindness is extremely important. People forget that, in this day and age especially, with women wanting equality and sometimes, I think mistakenly, using male models of success. There are virtues that are oftentimes unique to women. Those are going to be important to the new kind of success. Success being defined not by how many billions of dollars did that company make, how many new products did you get out, but as something that makes a wonderful difference in the long term. When people measure their lives in those terms, the passion is there, the self-guidance is there, and the rewards are there. The success is always there.  **What do you think you know now about achievement that you didn't know when you were younger?**  Amy Tan: When I was younger, I thought achievement had to do with gaining approval from other people -- my parents, my teachers, then higher-ups. It was a plateau at one level and then a continual climbing, always seeking higher and higher levels of approval. That was what achievement was: the plateaus you always had to maintain, the highest standards, the "A's." People would give you the feedback and tell you if you had done the achievement.  *I've learned that achievement is a sense, what -- more importantly -- is a sense of oneself and that it's never a feeling of self-satisfaction. That the people who have achieved more probably are those who always say, "I don't deserve this." Because they were doing exactly what they loved to do, and what ended up being quite helpful, maybe, to other people. But not seeking approval, not trying to follow the ordinary way of doing things, the expected way of doing things, the accepted way of doing things. They are not aversive in their actions and, yet they know how to ruffle the system and make better things happen, not for self-importance but for larger reasons.*  When I look at external success and internal success, I always have to keep those things in mind. For example, external success has to do with people who may see me as a model, or an example, or a representative. As much as I may dislike or want to reject that responsibility, this is something that comes with public success. It's important to give others a sense of hope that it is possible and you can come from really different places in the world and find your own place in the world that's unique for yourself.  **A lot of what you say rings true but it's so hard to come to grips with.**  Amy Tan: It's a luxury being a writer, because all you ever think about is life.  **Is there some idea or problem that most concerns you these days, that holds most of your attention? As we look to the years ahead, what do you think the biggest challenges are? What do you think the most important problems to solve are?**   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-007)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-007) |   Amy Tan: I think of population and the demands on the earth. There are all these people out there, so many people looking for the same kind of happiness, the same kind of success, the same kinds of comforts. Some people are going to lose out, but there also might be some compromises made in the world.  It's not simply material ones or environmental ones. I worry about ethical ones, moral ones, the kinds of compromises that are constantly being made for pragmatic reasons. I see this all the time in myself. Should I do this? It's just easier to ahead and do that. It's those little things, they seem very small but I think eventually they also erode the world. Our willingness to compromise, it all leads to the big picture.  I worry about that within myself. I worry about the contradictions. I know it's part of human nature to have contradictions, to believe one thing logically and to believe another emotionally. and to do quite another for other, pragmatic reasons. For example, that all people should have freedom of expression and when you carry that to a religious point of view you realize different people have beliefs about life after death, and karma and reincarnation, and damnation and salvation, or nothing. These beliefs affect how we act in the here and now.  How do we feel about abortion rights, or the right to die, or the death penalty? Those beliefs influence what we do, not simply in those larger issues but what we think we're contributing to the world, for what period of time and for whom. So I just about this very large morass of beliefs and how muddled they are getting, especially as the world gets more crowded, but also much more international, where a mix of things must co-exist. I think about the ideas, the emotions, the desires that go behind that.  **Is there anything you've thought about that you would like to do that you haven't done yet?**   |  | | --- | | [[Amy Tan Interview Photo](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-006)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/tan0-006) |   Amy Tan: There are so many things I would like to do. I would like to go trekking into Nepal. I would like to write a song. I would like to breed Yorkies. Sometimes I think I would like to be an interior decorator. There are so many things but the nice thing about being a writer is if I can't do all of those things, all I have to do is imagine them and put them in a story. That's second place but it's pretty good.  **You make it sound so simple. Looking back from this point in your life, what is your advice to young people who are starting out?**  Amy Tan: I go back to this idea that I only discovered when I was older. I wish I had known it when I was younger, because I think I missed a lot of observations in life. That is to develop your own philosophy. I always thought philosophy was one of the most useless subjects in the world. It's extremely important in how you perceive the world and your place in the world and what happens in the world. Is it luck? Is it fate? Is it coincidence? Is there a pattern to history? Do things repeat themselves? What in human nature is inherited versus self-determined? All of those things are so important in how you deal with the changes that happen in life -- how you deal with your successes, your failures, with love, with loss.  So apart from all those very tangible, discrete goals, I think it's nice to start off with the framework of what that philosophy might encompass. Nobody can tell you what it is. It's uniquely your own and you put the things in the basket that you want: the questions you want, the things that are important, the values, the ideas, the emotions. You look at it from time to time and see if it's staying the same or if it's changing. It's a wonderful way to observe life, because so much of life is not simply getting from step to step, but it's the things you discover about yourself and others around you and your relationships.  It's fascinating and that makes every life worth living. It makes you see in everybody you meet, no matter how much you respect or disrespect them, that their life is uniquely theirs and deserves some consideration too. It makes life fascinating and a wonder.  **If you had to choose one or two books to read to your grandchildren, what might they be? You can choose as many as you wish.**  [[http://www.achievement.org/library/bookcovers/HundredSec_0.gif](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/bibliography/HundredSec_0)](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/bibliography/HundredSec_0)  Amy Tan: How old are these grandkids? This sounds like a very selfish thing, a very egocentric thing. I would probably read them a book that I've written. If they were young, I would read them *The Moon Lady*or *The Chinese Siamese Cat.*If they were older, I would read them *The Joy Luck Club*or *The Kitchen God's Wife*or *The Hundred Secret Senses,*because the things I would want to say to my grandchildren, if I had them, are the things that I wanted to say to myself when I was younger, exactly those things. It's not out of pride that these are better stories or words. These are the things that are important to me and my family. My books and my stories are about families, so why wouldn't I tell them the things that I thought were important to our family, that are in my books?  **Finally, what does the American Dream mean to you?**  Amy Tan: It took me a long time to understand what the American Dream was. I always thought it was that things get better and better. You have every right to have things get better and better, and equal opportunity and all of that. My parents took it literally. We moved from 41st to 51st to 61st Street and Highland Avenue in Oakland. I mean, we were going higher and higher up in the world.  *I realize now that the most important thing that is an American Dream -- in looking at people living in other countries, in looking at the life my sisters had not growing up in this country -- is the American freedom to create your own identity. I think that's uniquely American. In no other country do you have that opportunity. It's not to say that everything will happen fairly and the way that you want. But I think that this is a country where that opportunity -- to be as wild as you want, as generous as you want, as crazy as you want, as artistic as you want, that all of that, the whole range -- exists. And we have a Constitution, a tradition, a culture that supports that. I hope it continues to support that. I hope it especially continues to support the arts in that direction. It is that self-determination of your identity, to define what it means to be an American, and that nobody defines that for you.*  **Amy, please count me among your admirers. That was wonderful.**  Thank you.   |  | | --- | | *This page last revised on Jan 16, 2008 16:17 EDT* | |