



# The Joy Luck Club

By Amy Tan

First published 1989

Genre & subject

Domestic fiction

Chinese American fiction

Mother and daughters

## Synopsis

The Joy Luck Club consists of sixteen interlocking stories about the lives of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their four American-born daughters. In 1949, the four mothers meet at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco and agree to continue to meet to play mah-jong. They call their mah-jong group the Joy Luck Club. The stories told in this novel revolve around the Joy Luck Club women and their daughters. Structurally, the novel is divided into four major sections, with two sections focusing on the stories of the mothers and two sections on the stories of the daughters.

## Author biography

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California. She is the second of three children born to Chinese immigrants. When Tan was 15 years old, her older brother Peter and her father died of brain tumours within eight months of each other. Tan's mother moved her and her brother to Switzerland, where Amy finished high school at the Institut Monte Rosa, Montreux. During this period in her life, Amy learned about her mother's former marriage to an abusive man in China, of their four children and how her mother was forced to leave her children from a previous marriage behind in Shanghai.

Tan received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English and linguistics from San José State, and later did doctoral linguistics studies at UC Santa Cruz and UC Berkeley. While in school, she worked odd jobs—switchboard operator, carhop, bartender, and pizza maker—before starting a writing career. She currently resides in Sausalito, California, with her husband.

## Discussion starters

- 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. Which of the eight main characters did you identify with the most? Why?
- When Jing-mei's aunts 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". How does this exchange set the stage for the stories that follow? How well do any of the mothers and daughters know each other in this book?

- 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. How are the daughters' romantic choices influenced, if at all, by their mothers, who had fewer choices of their own?
- 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. Find and discuss other examples that challenge American stereotypes of Chinese culture.
- 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. Discuss the differences between the daughters of the members of the Joy Luck Club. How is their behaviour influenced by family and culture?
- 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 mah-jong winnings. What do you think is the significance of these meetings to the women who attend them?
- 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?
- When Jing-mei visits China with her father toward the end of the book, she is constantly struck by the signs of capitalism everywhere: in the hotel she finds "a wet bar stocked with Heineken beer, Coke Classic, and Seven-Up, mini-bottles of Johnnie Walker Red, Bacardi rum and Smirnoff vodka, and packets of M&M's, honey roasted cashews, and Cadbury chocolate bars. And again I say out loud, 'This is communist China?' ". What does she mean by this observation and question?
- What are your thoughts on the structure of *The Joy Luck Club*? It is not a traditional novel told by one narrator, but the stories are very intricately connected. How did that affect your reading experience?
- Amy Tan's work has been highly anthologised 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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