Book Review: *Home to Stay*

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This animal wants to take
the world in his mouth
and eat it slowly. If he caught her
he would still be angry.
The title of this painting appears,
the painter's sister lets us know,
on the back. It is called Happiness.
She is sorry, she says.
They are all called Happiness.

Pat Bridges

Home to Stay, ed. Sylvia Watanabe and
Carol Bruchac. Greenfield Center, N.Y.:

The sales of recent fiction like Maxine
Hong Kingston's Tripmaster Monkey and
Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club, and the fre­
cuency with which individual stories by
Gish Jen, Fae Myenne Ng, and Bharati
Mukherjee appear in the major periodicals
indicate the burgeoning popularity of fic­
tion written by Asian-American women.
The five named above are some current
leaders in a field whose groundwork was
in fact laid by others—Wakako Yamauchi
and Hisaye Yamamoto among them—who
have been publishing fine fiction for
years. The editors of Home to Stay have
included works by all these women and
balanced the collection by embracing the
work of younger writers as well.

In her introduction, Carol Bruchac says
she was attracted to this project because
she felt it had the potential to "teach us
what it is like to live in a country which
does not do women justice."

"An Offering of Fruit" accomplishes her
father's ambition, and she, the once
beautified woman, is the embodiment of an
American woman's nightmare ride on a "Wilshire
Bus": "So clear out, all of you," says the
Caucasian antagonist, "and remember to
take every last one of your slant-eyed pick­
aninies with you!" Soon after, the
traumatized woman arrives at the VA hospital
to visit her husband, where she confronts a
different prejudice. She "ran to his bed
and broke into sobs that she could not
control. Buro was amazed because it was
hardly her first visit and she had never
shown such weakness before, but solving
the mystery handily, he patted her head,
looked around smugly at his roommates,
and asked tenderly, 'What's the matter?
You've been missing me a whole lot, huh?'

And she, finally drying her eyes, sniffed
and nodded and bravely smiled and
answered him with the question, yes,
weren't women silly?"

Men are the sources of women's amaze­
ment in other stories, too—sometimes be­
cause they cannot transcend, and some­
times because they do transcend, the roles
their cultures have assigned them. In

Mueller's story, the relocation and
the teenage son that she wants other than a man
work together. But when the protagonist
says, "An Offering of Fruit" accomplishes her
father's ambition, and she, the once
beautified woman, is the embodiment of an
American woman's nightmare ride on a "Wilshire
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their cultures have assigned them. In
ian, Japanese, Chinese, Malay-Asian, Indonesian, Pakistani extraction, expectations of exoticism. 5 Honeymoon Hotel,* company a Japanese "tremulous arrival to a Hawaii, and one of the Davenport's "House of a Japanese crime boss to ankles. However, of being an outsider is sent. Marnie Mueller's story of a family's adjustment in the Tule Lake at war, and if a Japanese-American we ride on a "Wilshire it, all of you," says the list, "and remember to of your slant-eyed pickers." Soon after, the lives at the VA hospital where she confronts her. She 'ran to his bed that she could not amazed because it was hit and she had never been before, but solving it, he patted her head, angrily at his roommates, crying her eyes, sniffed bravely smiled and with the question, yes, if?

pieces of women's amaze- es, too—sometimes be transcend, and some- do transcend, the roles we assigned them. In Mueller's story, the father is so affected by the relocation and by the changes in his teenage son that he realizes, "if he were other than a man, he would now weep." But when the protagonist of Mavis Har's "An Offering of Rice" is suddenly unable to accomplish her normal housework, it is her father who replaces her. "All her life, she had been taught that a Japanese man does not do women's work. She could not help thinking of that as she remembered Otsan pushing Nisan's shirts across the wooden ribs of the washboard, the soapy water eating away the hard callouses on his palms and cutting into the deep grooves in his fingernails. He was a practical man. He did not say any thing. He did what was necessary."

A few of the stories render a dual otherness in women who feel not only strangers in their adopted country but alien to the civilization they have left behind as well. Lindo Jong, the first-generation Chinese mother in Tan's excerpt from *The Joy Luck Club* calls this double-facedness: native Chinese can recognize the foreignness of a Chinese-American girl with as little trouble as Caucasian Americans can.

All readers develop tests for distinguishing work that transcends the very good and achieves the beautiful, and an unusually large number of these stories pass mine. I would single out three. Mavis Har's "An Offering of Rice" actualizes the implications for conflict between the generations, sexes, and cultures within a single Japanese-American family, and it does so movingly. There is one moment, darkly funny even in its horror, where the story actually soars. Here is the daughter, promoted into a new position at the pineapple factory and daydreaming about the kiss she wants from her boyfriend. "Tatsue reached higher into the mouth of the machine for her next slices. Suddenly, she felt a stinging numbness in her hand. She looked at her glove. The fingertip was incredibly small, she accept her."

She did not cry out. The blood-stained pineapple slices moved down the conveyor belt, and somewhere down the row, Screamed too. As the foreladies gathered around Tatsue and swept her off to the dispensary, she heard the screaming down the line saw the bloody slices and screamed too. As the foreladies gathered around Tatsue and swept her off to the dispensary, she heard the screaming down the line. Suddenly, the machine for her next slices. Suddenly, the tattooed uncle finally dies comes an unexpected and mortifying ending as appropriate and mortifying as any I've ever read.

Finally, "The White Umbrella" in Gish Jen's story serves in complex ways as a symbol illuminating the choices that must be made by a little Asian-American girl—and by implication everyone whose ethnicity is in danger of being compromised by the tendency of a dominant culture to absorb. Should she accept her matronly white piano teacher's well-meaning offer to use the umbrella, or should she stick it out by herself in the rain? In the hands of another author, this piece might be didactic; in Jen's, it's incredibly funny.
These stories soar and sing—two words that are keys to the tone of the whole anthology. In fact, those words—and words synonymous—echo throughout: Sylvia Watanabe's "Talking to the Dead" ends, "And she sings, she sings, she sings," and the last words in Kingston's excerpt from China Men are, "I have heard the land sing." I have seen the bright blue streaks of spirits whisking through the air." The final image in Linda Ty-Casper's "Hills, Sky, and Longing" is "a peregrine flying without wings." Though the stories are not universally optimistic, most are; the gaze of the people reflected here is upward, the mood generally joyful. It's a glorious collection.

William Osborn


During the bombing of Kweilin, as Suyuan tells her daughter Jing-Mei (June), she gathered three other young women to play mah jong, for, "How long can you see in your mind arms and legs hanging from telephone wires and starving dogs running down the streets with half-chewed hands dangling from their jaws? (24) The only way to survive the horror and the loss of family was to hold on to some tradition, to seek joy wherever one could find it: "...we decided to hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year...Each week we could forget past wrongs done to us. We...laughed, we played games, lost and won, we told the best stories. And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that's how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck" (25).

But as the Japanese army approached the city, Suyuan fled on foot with her baby twin daughters to find her Army Officer husband. The babies had to be abandoned with "hope for luck," and Suyuan awoke delirious in a hospital to learn that her husband was dead. After searching unsuccessfully for the babies, she and her new husband became refugees in San Francisco, where she began a new version of the club, with three women from the Chinese Baptist Church, which she joined out of polite gratitude for the two dresses given to her by the missionary ladies of the refugee welcome society. Together, these transplanted Chinese, their husbands and children would make a new extended family; the club would become Americanized enough to include stock investments, which, unlike mah jong, "relied on luck more than skill" and allowed everyone to be winners, "so everyone can have some joy." (30) After Suyuan's sudden death, the "aunties" pool their investment earnings to send June to China to meet her newly found half-sisters, whom Suyuan had relentlessly searched for by mail. Such is the bare frame for this remarkable novel, the first and last of the sixteen stories that compose it.

The rest of the stories are told by the other mothers and daughters of the "new family": Lindo and Waverly Jong, Ying-Ying and Lena St. Clair, and An-Mei and Rose Hsu. Throughout the entire novel, we see the mothers' concern that their histories be transmitted to their daughters, just as their spirits and bodies had already been passed on at an early age. Simultaneously, we see the daughters' desire to be free of their mothers, to break from their Chinese, even though another language and something unattainable they cannot.

The book is divided into four stories, each a symbolic fable. In the story from a Thousand Layers of Lilies where things begin, the mothers tell their childhoods in arranged marriages and privilege, of war, of the third section, "Western Skies," the escape from China, the new world, their feelings, because, as Ying-Ying tells her infant daughter, she is part of the same body. There is a Japanese prison camp that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been that is part of history, and birth, she sprang from a fish, and has been