1-1-1990

Book Review: *The Joy Luck Club*

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Recommended Citation
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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."

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 together 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 birth. Simultaneously, we see the daughters' desires to be free of their mothers, to be Chinese, even though they cannot.

The book is divided into four stories, each symbolic fable. In the first, from A Thousand Acres, where things begin, the mothers' tales of arranged marriages and tradition and privilege, of war and sacrifice, the fourth section, "Western Skies," the escape from China, the new world, their new life because, as Ying-Ying says, "my daughter, she is in the same body. There is that part of mine that is part of mine. She was born, she sprang from fish, and has been since. All her life, though from another place, she is now here."

All of the mothers, while adapting to their new lives in the United States, while adapting to their new opportunities, have struggled to keep the dignity of their cultural traditions, and the wisdom of the culture that sees them as their traditions as others.

In the two last chapters, the daughters speak in "Malignant Gates"...
...and works hard (89), mothers' fears that they can, without explanations. Lena Jordan recognizes the power of her mother's influence.

In "American Translation" the four sections of four stories, each preceded by a symbolic fable. In the first section, "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," from "the East, where things begin," the mothers tell of their childbirths in China and their own mothers, tales of concubinage and arranged marriages at childhood, of wealth and privilege, of war and separation. In the fourth section, "Queen Mother of the Western Skies," the mothers tell of their escape from China, their adjustment to the new world, their lives up to the present, because, as Ying-Ying explains, "...I love my daughter. She and I have shared the same body. There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved" (242).

All of the mothers, refugees in the United States, while adapting to new rules and taking advantage of surprising opportunities, have struggled to maintain the dignity of their culture and the authority and wisdom of their parenthood in a new culture that sees them as outdated and as strongly believes that her birthright must never be confiscated from her by anyone, anywhere, any time. Lena St. Clair listens to her mother's fear of the lack of balance in the crowded apartments leaning out of the steep hills, where "A man can grab you off the streets, sell you to someone else ..." (106).

In "American Translation" the daughters are grown and while still trying to justify their Americaness to their mothers also realize their Chineseness and the strength of their mothers' influence. Rose Hsu Jordan talks to a psychiatrist about her failing marriage, but her mother says that she must not play the piano well. Lena St. Clair listens to her mother's fear of the lack of balance in the crowded apartments leaning out of the steep hills, where "A man can grab you off the streets, sell you to someone else ..." (106).

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it can be fixed just fine by adding soy sauce. June Woo, the only unmarried daughter, still working on being a failure, tries to take the worst crab, one without a leg, at the New Year’s dinner; but her mother prevents her, takes it herself and removes it to the kitchen uneaten.

One reads along compelled by these stories despite the obliqueness of the overall plot, for the several plots start and stop, weave in and out, until, at the end, one is aware of a rich tapestry and wants to read all over again from the beginning and, at the same time, to trace some of the pictures. Although the sixteen stories together make one intricately patterned novel, you can also read the sections as four novelettes. Or you can read the four families’ stories, one at a time. For instance, the Jong family is chronicled in I, 3; II, 1; III, 2; and IV, 3). So that there are four “vertical” novelettes. You could see the eight stories of the mothers (two each) as a half-novel of the immigrant experience and the eight stories of the daughters as a half-novel of the experience of those caught between two cultures. And finally you could read eight accounts of two stories each that make up the thoughts of the eight characters. Reading in these ways brings the full tapestry richness to another cover-to-cover reading.

But in another sense, the novel’s unusual structure is like an evening of mah jong, a game which, Suyuon suggests to her daughter is like life, at least as the Chinese see it. Each of the novel’s four sections of four stories represents a direction and one of the four winds; just as the players face east, south, west, and north, and each other, taking turns to travel around the board and make one’s own little kingdom from among the four sets of tiles. And thematically the families both cooperate with each other—come together for companionship and joy—and compete with each other for success and recognition.

But there is a great deal more to commend the book than the unusual structure. We get a first-hand account of life for women in China in the early part of this century, told to us, intimately, as if by our own mothers. And we learn, almost as if from a sister or cousin, what it is like to grow up as a part of two such different cultures in San Francisco. June says, “... my mother and I spoke two different languages. ... I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese. ... We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more” (34-37). In this atmosphere of one culture slipping away and another in the process of being formed, the intensity of the mother-daughter relationship seems to increase, since each must struggle all the more to know the other, for although their faces are alike, their backgrounds, their expectations, as well as their natural languages are diverse. The mothers are more sure of who they are—transplanted Chinese. But what are the daughters? Lindo tells Waverly, “When you go to China... you don’t even have to open your mouth. They already know you are an outsider. They know just watching the way you walk, the way you carry your face” (253). Conversely, they are spotted immediately in America as Chinese. Or at least as Orientals: Rose Hsu says to her date’s mother, “Mrs. Jordan, I am not Vietnamese. ... And I have no intention of marrying your son.” (118) An-Mei remembers, “I was two years old when my family immigrated there in 1955; my experience.

But a novel is more than study or biography. It is an artist of high quality in a mixture of the Impressionist style from China and from America. An-Mei remembers from the floating families and from the floating family, servant boy raft, with a diving board, swinging around its neck, up and down, and cannot swallow from the depths of it again. The boy plays with a bird’s throat and another, onto the end where they are noticed and gutted by an old woman who then turns to the head of a large turtle. Beheaded with a turtle body drained of blood, Lindo Jong describes the death of a Chinatown: the “lou—wheat,‘east,’ (259). And “I saw each side of the temple. But when the pagoda was topped with stacks of dirt. If you looked on the pretend-pagodas, you became narrow and dirty” (260).

Tan’s ear is as a—an or through turns odd...
among the four sets of really the families both each other—come in relationship and joy—and other for success and deal more to compete the unusual structure.

A novel is more than a sociological study or biographical account; and Tan is an artist of high quality, perhaps brushing in a mixture of the Chinese and Western Impressionist styles of painting. Scenes from China and from San Francisco linger.

An-Mei remembers at age four watching from the floating pavilion of her rich family, servant boys catching fish from a raft, with a diving bird, a rope tied to a ring around its neck so that it must return and cannot swallow the fish it brings up from the depths of the river again and again. The boy pulls the fish out of the bird's throat and tosses them, one after another, onto the deck of the family boat, where they are robotically scaled and gutted by an old bent servant woman, who then turns to lure with a stick the hawk's throat and tosses them, one after another, onto the deck of the family boat, where they are robotically scaled and gutted by an old bent servant woman, who then turns to lure with a stick the branch. "You become restless and rob graves" in English, she says, "a college drop-off" (37). And Auntie Ying not "hard of hearing" but "hard of listening" (35). A cookie fortune reads "Money is the root of all evil. Look around you and dig deep" in English, and "Money is a bad influence. You become restless and rob graves" in Chinese. Says Lindo, "These are not fortunes, they are bad instructions" (262).

Suyuan is unabashed about her daughter's counselor is a "psyche-atriks" (37) and Auntie Ying not "hard of hearing" but "hard of listening" (35). A cookie fortune reads "Money is the root of all evil. Look around you and dig deep" in English, and "Money is a bad influence. You become restless and rob graves" in Chinese. Says Lindo, "These are not fortunes, they are bad instructions" (262).

Because there is very little physical description of the characters, they may, in one way, be meant to be representative. But there is no question that each maintains an inner distinction; as we follow them from childhood to marriage and motherhood, distinctions that cannot be encapsulated, though we may want to say wistful Rose Hsu, subtly domineering Lindo, self-apologetic June. The master artist selects details carefully, and yet a painting can only hint at the depth of its subjects. I feel as if I know the characters intimately yet could well hear the characters objecting as Suyuan does to her
daughter: "You don’t even know little per­cent of me!" (27) Amy Tan’s China and San Francisco may be picturable, but the characters are never predictable.

In this novel the matrilineal is stressed. Suyuan tells June, "They are all dead, your grandparents, your uncles, and their wives and children, all killed in the war, when a bomb fell on their house. So many generations in one instant... Our whole family is gone. It is just you and I" (272). In doing so, she ignores the very much alive husband and father. And why? Perhaps to right the imbalance of the centuries of patriarchy and patrilinealism in China. For instance, after Lindo's betrothal at the age of two, her mother no longer called her daughter. She was henceforth the daughter of her mother-in-law: "My mother did not treat me this way because she did not love me. She would say this biting back her tongue, so she wouldn’t wish for something that was no longer hers." When she was twelve, Lindo would live with her husband's family, would be expected to "raise proper sons, care for the old people, and faithfully sweep the family burial grounds..." (51). There could be no divorce or remarriage, and any daughter she had would be similarly given away. An-Mei says, "I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing."

Similarly the metaphor in fable three describes the female line as endlessly reflective. A mother hangs a mirror at the headboard of her daughter's marital bed to balance the mirror at the foot of the bed: "In this mirror is my future grandchild.... And the daughter looked—and... There it was: her own reflection looking back at her" (45). In fable four the metaphor is cyclical: the laughing baby sitting on her grandmother's lap has "lived forever, over and over again" and has come back to teach her mother "How to lose [her] innocence but not [her] hope. How to laugh forever."

In America the cycle seems only superficial. Instead of "funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts," the mothers wear "slacks, bright print blouses, and different versions of sturdy walking shoes" (28); and the daughters find it "fashionable to use their Chinese names" (37). In reality, the mothers fear, as June senses when she ac-
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senses when she ac-
cept the money for her trip to China, that
their daughters are "unmindful of all the
truths and hopes they have brought to
America. ... They see daughters who will
bear grandchildren born without any con-
necting hope passed from generation to
generation," who will forget that "your
mother is in your bones" (40-41). For all of
them, June Woo, in China, is able to bridge
both cultures and generations. Looking
out of the train window, she feels a
spiritual connection with the place and
the past: "I also have misty eyes, as if I had
seen this a long, long time ago, and had al-
most forgotten" (268). And as June and
her half-sisters watch the Polaroid snap-
shot of them developing, they suddenly
see their mother's face looking back at
them.

Amy Tan dedicates The Joy Luck Club
to "my mother and the memory of her
mother."

Roberta Simone