

McLean CONNECTION

Growing Up Tan

Amy Tan inspires laughter and tears at Reston Community Center Q&A Lecture.

By [Aranya Tomseth](#)

Thursday, October 26, 2006

During a therapy session many years ago, Amy Tan took a break from rattling on about her workaholic tendencies and turned to look at her psychiatrist. He was sound asleep.

"I decided that it must be a very clever therapy technique designed to make me have this really big reaction," said Tan, who did not bother to wake her doctor after her discovery.

However, when Tan caught her psychiatrist dozing during their next few sessions, she had to admit that her therapy technique theory was unlikely. "He wasn't that good of an actor," joked Tan.

She promptly ended her therapy sessions, but her somnolent psychiatrist had given her an epiphany.

"What I learned from that, is that I should do something that was important to me," said Tan, who was working 90 hours a week as a business writer at the time. "So I cut back to 50 billable hours a week and started taking jazz piano lessons and writing fiction, and guess which one took hold?"

Thus were the beginnings of the career of acclaimed novelist Amy Tan — author of "The Joy Luck Club," "The Kitchen God's Wife," "The Hundred Secret Senses," "The Bonesetter's Daughter," and most recently, "Saving Fish From Drowning."

ON SATURDAY, Oct. 14, Tan shared personal anecdotes from her life at Reston Community Center's CenterStage. Fans packed into the auditorium, nearly filling it to capacity. Tan's lecture was followed by a question-and-answer session, and a book signing.

"I've read 'The Joy Luck Club' six times," said Reston resident Janet Oikawa. "I can open it to any page and get into it ... she is so good at relating the cultural past to the cultural present."

Oikawa, who is half Japanese and half American, said she loves Tan's books because she relates to their cultural themes. Saturday's lecture was the first time that Oikawa saw Tan in person.

"It was really interesting and entertaining," said Oikawa. "I was crying my eyes out at the end."

Falls Church resident Judy Joe had seen Tan's lectures before, but said she never tires of them. Like Oikawa, Joe enjoys relating to Tan's Asian American characters.

"She's wonderful," said Joe. "Her stories are just such an inspiration to read."

While not Asian, Alexandria resident Tina Richardson said she has been a long-time fan of Amy Tan because her stories are so emotionally engaging.

"She writes from the heart," said Richardson. "Seeing her was amazing."



Photo by Aranya Tomseth/The Connection

Amy Tan signs books for fans at Reston Community Center.

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BORN TO CHINESE immigrant parents in Oakland, Calif. in 1952, Tan led a relatively peaceful existence until her Baptist minister father and her beloved older brother both died of brain tumors in the same year. Tan, who was 14 at the time, was devastated. Convinced that the family was cursed, Tan's mother Daisy packed up their belongings and took Amy and her younger brother to Holland. Daisy Tan had decided on Holland while washing dishes in the kitchen one day.

"My mother held up this container of Old Dutch cleanser and said 'Holland is clean — we are moving to Holland,'" said Tan.

Upon arriving in Holland, Tan and her younger brother discovered that their mother had no plans for living arrangements, school or transportation.

"Instead of being scared, my brother and I were just excited that she was so crazy," said Tan. "It was adventurous."

Their mother eventually procured a car and the family ended up in Montreaux, Switzerland. There were two openings at the international school and a furnished apartment for rent. After graduating from high school in Switzerland, Tan returned to the U.S. to go to college and ultimately graduated with a master's degree in linguistics from San Jose State University.

TAN'S VOLATILE relationship with her mother influenced her throughout her life, and Tan initially made efforts to distance herself from her. However, during a vacation in Hawaii, Tan received news that her mother had suffered a massive heart attack several days earlier, but no one had been able to locate Tan until that moment. Horrified that her mother had died without her knowing, Tan made a solemn promise.

"I prayed to God or Buddha or whoever and said 'if my mother lives, I will listen to all of her stories and I will take her to China to find my half-sister that she left behind, and I will write stories about her,'" said Tan.

When she finally got a hold of her mother at the hospital where she worked, Daisy Tan happily informed her daughter that she had not suffered a heart attack, but had simply experienced chest pains after getting into an altercation with a fish monger. Nevertheless, Tan kept her promise and took her mother to China. When they returned, Tan's agent called to tell her that she had six offers on her as yet unwritten book "The Joy Luck Club." Tan got an advance and spent four months writing her first novel.

"I worked on that book day and night because I was afraid that if I didn't finish it in four months, they would rescind their offer," said Tan.

The book went on to be an international success, and Tan later penned the screenplay for the film of the same name. She then wrote "The Kitchen God's Wife," a book based on her mother's life. Tan's relationship with her mother blossomed with her writing career, but unfortunately, Daisy Tan was diagnosed with Alzheimers and never got to finish reading "The Kitchen God's Wife."

"She always said 'I don't need to finish it, I know what happens,'" said Tan.

Looking back on the course of her life, Tan said she is often dumbfounded at where she is today.

"So much has happened," said Tan. "I think it's some kind of destiny, or fate, or maybe it was all an accident, or maybe it really is because I listened to my mother ... I wonder about all of those things, and I think yes, yes, yes and yes — all of those things are possible."



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