



Where the Past Begins: A Writer's Memoir

Amy Tan

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From *New York Times* bestselling author Amy Tan, a memoir about finding meaning in life through acts of creativity and imagination

In *Where the Past Begins*, bestselling author of *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Valley of Amazement* Amy Tan reveals the ways that our memories and personal experiences can inform our creative work. Drawing on her vivid impressions of her upbringing, Tan investigates the truths and inspirations behind her writing while illuminating how we all explore, confront, and process complex memories, especially half-forgotten ones from childhood.

With candor, empathy, and humor, Tan sheds light on her own writing process, sharing her hard-won insights on the nature of creativity and inspiration while exploring the universal urge to examine truth through the workings of imagination—and what that imaginative world tells us about our own lives. *Where the Past Begins* is both a unique look into the mind of an extraordinary storyteller and an indispensable guide for writers, artists, and other creative thinkers.

Where the Past Begins: A Writer's Memoir Details

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From Reader Review Where the Past Begins: A Writer's Memoir for online ebook

Krista says

My childhood with its topsy-turvy emotions has, in fact, been a reason to write. I can lay it squarely on the page and see what it was. I can understand it and see the patterns. My characters are witness to what I went through. In each story, we are untangling a knot in a huge matted mess. The work of undoing them one at a time is the most gratifying part of writing, but the mess will always be there.

So, apparently Amy Tan was contractually obligated to provide her new editor, Daniel Halpern at Ecco, with two books – one fiction, one non – and while he was hoping for a memoir, Tan resisted: it would seem that the older she gets, the more tortuous her writing process has become (perhaps due to the brain lesions resulting from Lyme disease or the lingering effects of a massive concussion that affected her brain's language center), and the idea of a memoir – with the constant writing and rewriting and hedging and second-guessing – wasn't enticing to her. They struck a deal: Tan would send fifteen uncorrected pages on whatever she felt like writing to Halpern per week, and he would turn it into a book; this book. As a result, *Where the Past Begins* is very free-form, with essays on drawing and music appreciation, old journal entries and letters, an overlong email exchange between Tan and Halpern from when she was writing *The Valley of Amazement*, and chapters about her childhood and what she has been able to unearth about her family back in China. As a result, this is an inconsistent reading experience – some parts were fascinating, others less so – but as someone who has adored Tan's fiction throughout the years, I appreciated learning the inspiration behind some of her most gut-punching scenes. For the most part this worked for me, but individual experience may vary.

Tonight I go to a spot in my mind where the foot of the mountain and a river connect, sneggin, a meeting place. I wait until I feel the sound pulsing in my veins. And it comes – Pes-pas! Pes-pas! – the sound of horses galloping softly over grass. The second vowel tightens. Pes-pis! Pes-pis! The hooves are hitting the hard-baked earth of the steppes. Soon we will arrive at that place where the past begins.

I didn't realise that Tan received a Masters in Linguistics before she started her writing career, and her lasting fascination with languages seems a key to understanding her point-of-view and the family dynamics that feature so heavily in her fiction. Tan didn't find out until after her mother died that what she thought was her mother's fluid Mandarin was actually heavily accented, and that her native Shanghaiese was spoken with a posh and educated dialect: not only was Daisy handicapped in America with her “rusty” pidgin English, but even when speaking “Chinese”, most people missed the subtleties of what she was saying – this *must* have affected how she was treated; *must* have contributed (along with what Tan assumes to be some degree of mental illness) to Daisy's stated loneliness and suicidal (not to mention homicidal) threats. If it wasn't true, it would seem an authorial overreach to have the Linguist lose elements of her own speech due to both illness and injury, and then watch her aging trilingual mother lose each of her own languages to dementia until she's reduced to speaking in the baby-talk of her mother tongue.

The story of my grandmother is like a torn map glued together with so many bits and pieces

that there is now more glue than map. The pieces haven't led to verifiable truth. I have imagined what the truth might have been, based on my own emotional and moral character. Others have done the same. We see what we want to believe. We are all unreliable narrators when it comes to speaking for the dead.

In particular, Tan is fascinated by dead languages and makes the point that once a language loses its native speakers – once no one is making puns or exchanging gossip in that tongue – it becomes impossible to actually know what those people's lives were like; cuneiform accounting tablets tell us nothing intimate of Sumerian domestic life. In the same way, Tan makes the point that we can never really know anyone by the words they leave behind – she can read old letters and study yellowing photos, but she will never *know* the grandmother who overdosed on opium when Daisy was only nine. And this leads to another interesting point:

I have never read an analysis of my work or me that reads as accurate. It's because they start off on the wrong path, have created the map and thereby see only those points and conclusions. There is no symbolic immortality to be had in giving one's archives to a library. It's perpetual misinterpretation. Who I was will have been missing since before I stepped off Earth's floor.

Apparently Tan intends to have all of her personal papers destroyed upon her death – all of the letters, journals, and partial novels that, as an admitted packrat, she now possesses – and this seems to be in line with what she's saying here: words on the page are dead things, not a conversation with their author, and open to misinterpretation; she wants to be remembered for what she has produced, not for what others assume those products mean. And that's very interesting coming from a Linguist-novelist; someone who uses language to discuss language; someone who uses language to untangle the knotted mess that is her inner self.

Where the Past Begins does have all the elements of a traditional memoir – we learn about Tan's childhood and her complicated relationship with her mother; the tragedies that befell the family when Tan was a teenager; the family stories behind some of her fictional scenes – but this “fugue state” free form style also includes material that didn't interest me very much. Still happy to have read it and am rounding up to four stars.

Diane Barnes says

3.5 rounded up. This is described as a memoir of Amy Tan's childhood and writing methods, but I think it's mostly a memoir of her mother and their relationship. Like Pat Conroy and his difficult love/hate connection with his violent father that infused all his books, the same thing appears to be true of Amy Tan and her Chinese immigrant, mentally ill, difficult mother. All of her books contain elements of her mother's life, in an attempt to understand what made her tick. Certainly her childhood was a horror, without physical abuse, but plenty of mental cruelty, losing her 16 year old brother and her father within 6 months of each other, both with the same type of brain tumor, and coping with her mother's instability. There are other essays here too, about music and art and her knowledge of linguistics. Her intellect shines through it all, and her quest to find out who she is, and what her past means to her. Any fan of Amy Tan will find much to admire about this book, but it is not an easy read, because she delves deeply into her own psyche, even when it's painful.

Eilonwy says

I'm never good at reviewing nonfiction!

This is not a book I would have chosen to read myself, despite having read and enjoyed Amy Tan's first two novels. But a friend of mine gave it to me, so I felt obligated to read it in a timely fashion. And I'm very glad I did.

This is apparently a collection of essays that Amy Tan was "assigned" to do by her editor. So while they are loosely joined in a linear fashion as a memoir, they also range over a wide number of subjects. Because they are each sort-of discrete, there is a fair amount of repetitiveness in getting re-introduced to some of Amy's family, and this lack of consistent flow is one reason I knocked a star off my rating. But her family has a fascinating and tragic story, which Amy narrates beautifully, and I was riveted through most of the essays. In addition, Amy herself is a very interesting person, and I really enjoyed hanging out with her in the pages of this book.

I was least interested by a section where she and her editor exchange emails about a WIP. This stuff is utterly engrossing when it's YOUR WIP being discussed, but not so much when it's somebody else's. (And I'm sure it didn't help that I haven't read whichever of her books it was.)

Luckily, the book got its mojo back for me after that section with a discussion about Amy's love of languages, and a very touching reminiscence about her mother's last months struggling with Alzheimer's Disease, which is also about language.

I am very grateful to my friend for choosing this book for me. :-)

Marisa says

Stunning and a real privilege to read. Read my full review [HERE](#) .

Kelli Oliver George says

Very disjointed and difficult to get interested in. I love Amy Tan, but this was disappointing.

Obsidian says

I have been reading Amy Tan since I was a teenager. I still have hard copies of her books on my shelf. I was annoyed the other day when I realized that somehow my copy of "The Joy Luck Club" went missing and had to go out and purchase another copy. I have been waiting for weeks now to get this copy of her memoir from the library. I was initially pretty happy with the memoir, but it was a very hard read to get through.

"Where the Past Begins" I have to say does give you insight into some of Tan's most famous works such as "The Joy Luck Club," "The Bonesetter's Daughter", and "The Kitchen God's Wife." You find out that she used her mother and maternal grandmother for inspiration for some of her characters. For example, the story

in "The Joy Luck Club" that follows An-mei Hsu that tells about how her mother was raped by a rich man and forced to become his concubine/fourth wife. We find out that a similar situation happened to Tan's grandmother.

When the memoir gives you glimpses into the events that have shaped her stories, the book really shines. I had more problems when the book took on things that I think would have better served being cut such as Part V Reading and Writing and a portion titled "I Am The Author of This Novel."

I am fascinated by Tan's family's history and the strongest portions of the book really are when she talks of her mother and even her father. It sounds like her parents had to struggle to be together and then when they came to America there were still issues that Tan's mother was trying to overcome. Some of the incidents sounded very shocking, and one wonders how she can keep going on as she had with seemingly no bitterness.

I also didn't realize that Tan's father died when she was a teen as well as an older brother. I think if we got a straight forward memoir that I would have enjoyed this more. I think jumping back and forth chronologically made things confusing. We also had Tan including the same information about her mother and maternal grandmother in different sections which made the book feel a bit repetitive. I outright disliked one of the chapters, Chapter Ten Letters to the Editor. It is just emails back and forth between her and her editor.

Tan includes some insight into the Shanghainese and what makes them so different. I really enjoyed that she included pictures of her family as well as drawings that she has done. That tipped things up enough for me to give this two stars.

Bkwmlee says

3.5 stars, rounded up to 4.

When I first learned that I had been approved for an ARC of Amy Tan's new memoir, I was excited, as I've enjoyed quite a few of Amy's books and count *The Joy Luck Club* as one of my favorites. Reading the summary, I understood going into it that this would be a memoir where Amy talks about many of the things that influenced her writing over the last 3 decades, with emphasis on her family's history and her own cultural heritage, both of which have served as a basis for her novels. While I would say yes, this memoir did deliver in terms of what was laid out in the summary, it did so in a way that I didn't quite expect, which impacted my overall enjoyment of the book as a whole.

In her memoir, family history was conveyed via the various mementos and keepsakes Amy finds – old photographs, letters, documents, newspaper clippings, etc. – all of which opened up the floodgates of her memories of her childhood, her relationship with her parents, her brothers, her extended family and relatives in China, some of whom she never really got to know. Digging deep into the past, Amy describes in candid detail the story of her maternal grandmother's life in China (the differing versions told to her by her mother and by relatives) and the impact this had on the life her mother ended up leading as well as the type of person she eventually became – the significance being how greatly this impacted the next generation, specifically Amy and the books she ended up writing. I found this part of the book fascinating and most enjoyable. But then, in the middle of all this history, entire sections are inserted that appear to be excerpted from Amy's journals -- random segments that seem to be (somewhat philosophical) self-reflections on her writing, tangents from her imaginative mind, ideas she had jotted down over the years as well as parts of stories that

she had written that never got published. For me, these journal excerpts were the parts of the book that I didn't expect and in fact, broke the flow of the narrative about Amy's life and her family, which affected my ability to enjoy this book as much as I would've liked. There was also a chapter that consisted entirely of letters between Amy and her editor, letters exchanged during the writing of *The Valley of Amazement* – while the letters were interesting and at times fun to read, I felt that they were a bit of a distraction and, like the journal entries, broke the flow of the book a bit. Of course, it didn't help that I haven't yet read *The Valley of Amazement*, so much of what was said about the novel was lost on me – perhaps later, after I read the book, I can come back to this chapter, during which time I'm sure I would be able to appreciate this chapter better.

In addition to giving us insight into her family's history and past, Amy also revealed many of her personal struggles, some of which I was surprised to find out about, such as her having epilepsy and the periodic lapses in her brain being able to function properly, also the fact that she suffered from depression that stemmed largely from her tragic childhood and a family history (on her mother's side) of suicidal tendencies. There were also the instances where she narrowly escaped death several times, all of which were described in such detail that it made my heart stop a few times. I appreciated all the details and stories that Amy told about her own life as well as those of her family, but what appealed to me most was Amy's depiction of her relationship with her mother, which was so vividly described in here (the theme of mother-daughter relationships is one of the things I love most about her novels – the ones that I've read, that is). There were so many aspects of Amy's childhood and upbringing that I was able to relate to, but most of all, it was her relationship with her mother that had me floored because of the striking similarities to my relationship with my mom -- many of the experiences Amy described about the way she and her mother often interacted, I had actually experienced the same things growing up, so I knew exactly what she was talking about when she described her feelings and reactions to situations that had occurred. I was also shocked at some of the similarities in background with our parents (i.e.: my mom is also Shanghainese and came from a well-to-do family, also a beauty in her youth who lived a privileged life but left all that behind to start over again in another country; my dad was also born into a Cantonese family with an ancestral home in Guangzhou and also came from a large family, with him being the oldest of 10 children). My parents' histories weren't as tragic of course, but many of the cultural and emotional nuances that Amy and her brothers experienced as a result of being raised in an immigrant Chinese household parallel the experiences my brother and I had -- also the pressure this caused on the entire family was similar (i.e.: the struggles with assimilating to a completely different life in a foreign country, constantly having to live up to certain expectations, the resentment towards having to give up so much in exchange for a way of life that didn't turn out as expected, etc.). It is this personal connection and also the emotional impact from reading Amy's story that made me round this up to a 4. I greatly admire Amy and her mother's strength, resolve, endurance, and most of all resilience in the face of all the tragedy and loss their family suffered. What is also admirable is Amy's continued dedication to her mother after the death of her father and brother – a dedication that continued to endure despite all the arguments and the hurts and the emotional pain inflicted (whether intentionally or unintentionally). The chapter where Amy described her relationship with her mother during the last years of her mother's life, when she was suffering from Alzheimer's and could barely talk or move, up through the days of her death, truly moved me to tears. That chapter alone reinforced for me the power of love and family and its ability to put previous grievances and wrongs suffered into perspective.

Despite the issues I had with the format (if it had been better organized instead of all over the place, I think I would've given this book a solid 4 stars, maybe even higher), I would still recommend this memoir to Amy's fans and/or anyone who has enjoyed her novels. The writing is wonderfully descriptive in many places and quite a few passages were beautifully rendered. The 80% or so of the book that talked about her childhood, family history, and their influences on her writing and in shaping who she became, really pulled me in... the rest, not as much, but overall this was still a worthwhile read. Also, knowing what I know now about the influence of her family background in her writing, this makes me want to go back and read/re-read Amy's novels in the context of what I learned, as I'm sure her novels will take on a whole new meaning for me now.

Received advance reader's copy from Harper Collins / Ecco via Edelweiss

Book Riot Community says

Love the novels of Amy Tan? Then you'll love to read about her childhood and influences. Love reading books where writers discuss their craft? Then you'll love learning about Tan's process and how she brings memory into her work. She's a wonderful writer, and it's a delight to have a work of nonfiction from her. It's a win for everyone, really.

Backlist bump: *The Bonesetter's Daughter* by Amy Tan

Tune in to our weekly podcast dedicated to all things new books, All The Books:
<http://bookriot.com/listen/shows/allt...>

Julie says

I continue to vacillate between 3 and 5 stars on this one. It's another one of those reads that I just can't pin down. (Proust started this dilemma of indecision.)

I've been a long-time fan of Amy Tan's novels, starting with *The Joy Luck Club*, and delighting in her works ever since, so I thought this would be a natural extension of my Tan-fandom. I'm not sure that I gained much, despite enjoying this.

Sometimes, peeking behind the curtain doesn't reveal all that much. There is a sense, throughout, that Tan is withholding something, on a certain level, despite her open-book persona. She reveals many details of her life but it's as if we were seeing them through a veil; that is, she gives a "laundry list autobiography", without pinning much emotion to the actions. This distance created between her and the reader doesn't exist in her novels.

In her fiction, I found that Tan speaks things that are "truer than true" ... getting at the very essence of a thing: one of the best writers in modern fiction, in fact, to deal with complex mother-daughter relationships. Her memoirs, on the other hand, seem to only skim the very entangled relationship she has with her mother, creating a distance between what she knows and what she wants us to see. I'm not finding any fault in that, for it is not a writer's duty to bare the soul for the reader, but I just find it perplexing that one would write a "tell-all book" but in the end "tell only some of it".

I have an ambivalence, in any case, with autobiographies/memoirs: I don't read them all that often, because I think people often don't tell the truth in them -- and so what's the point of that? Perhaps the genre is really not for me, in the end: I find myself squirming just writing this review about how uncomfortable auto-bios make me feel, especially from writers.

This one hit a nerve in a very puzzling, complicated way: what I can seem to figure out is that I miss the Greater Truth in her novels that is somehow missing from this work.

Nonetheless, I enjoyed it on a certain level and I remain a staunch fan of her fiction.

This time, I think the expression, "It's not you, it's me" is especially apt.

Jean says

I attended a talk by Amy Tan when she was promoting her first book. I enjoyed her talk and reading that book. I put her on my list of authors to follow. Since that time, I have read all her books and make a point of attending her talks whenever she is in my area.

This book is a memoir of her life to-date. She traces her family history through photographs. Tan describes her skill of nature drawings and compares that creativity to her writing. She discusses her mother's mental illness and its effect on her and the rest of her family. The main topic of the book is about writing and creativity. Tan discusses a collection of letters between herself and her editor, Daniel Halpern. She provides in-sights on writing. She brings out what it takes to be a professional writer. Tan is a gifted storyteller. I enjoy learning about authors and how they write.

I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. The book is fourteen and a half hours long. Amy Tan narrated her own book. It is great to hear the author read their book.

Tammy says

This book could easily have been titled Where a Writer Begins. Of course, I prefer the actual title and subtitle much better. Tan is courageous in what she reveals about her past and her pinging, beautiful mind. She deeply delves into her past as she pursues her sense of self and what created the wonderful writer that she is. I was moved. I was in awe. And, I am grateful for her generosity.

Ilana says

I think lots of people will like this book, but if you're a writer, reading this will be like reading the best and most ethical kind of pornography, or like eating the most delicious dessert you've had in a long time. Amy Tan makes me want to write and write and write and I could feel the impulse in my body as I read this, reminding me of just how physical writing can and its joys can be.

Angela M says

I have enjoyed several of Amy Tan's novels with their reflections on her Chinese heritage, on mother - daughter relationships. This is what prompted me to read her memoir which I hoped would be a look at her life, her family and the impact of these memories in her work. For the most part, this is what the book is , but it wasn't quite what I expected. It's a blend of thoughts on various things such as music and its impact on her writing , her self analysis of her creative process. While those sections were fascinating in some ways , the sections I enjoyed the most were when she talks about her childhood, her siblings, her parents' stories. Some entries left me scratching my head like journal entries from various times . There is a section of letters to and from her editor during the writing of *The Valley of Amazement*. I did find those exchanges somewhat interesting giving us a view of the interactions between writer and editor. Overall I just felt it to be an uneven mix mash.

The introduction was the section I truly enjoyed where she talks about the photos and documents she has holding the memory and history of her family. She astutely notes that sometimes what is not in the photo, what has been moved aside can jog a memory. She conveys some intimate personal details that I was not aware of - that she has epilepsy, suffered from depression and recognized years later that the suicidal tendencies of her mother were symptomatic of the depression she suffered. The writing in places was lovely, especially in the introduction. Recommended to fans of Amy Tan.

I received an advanced copy of this book from HarperCollins/Ecco throughout Edelweiss.

Brina says

I have been reading Amy Tan's novel since I was first introduced to *The Joy Luck Club* when I was in high school. At the time I lacked the life experience to thoroughly enjoy her work about complex mother and daughter relationships, so over the last year I have been rereading these intricate novels. After immersing myself in two of Tan's novels this year, it came as no surprise to me that I would want to read her new memoir *Where the Past Begins* as soon as it came out. While not Tan's usual fictional journey through China to California and back, this new work shed like on why Tan has written what she has. As with her fictional gems, I knew with this memoir that I would be in for a treat.

Having read *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen G-d's Wife*, and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, I have seen how Tan has used her family history of sorrow to weave a novel. She has written tales involving her mother leaving twin daughters on a road in the Chinese countryside as well as both her mother and grandmother experiencing children dying young. Some of these tales must contain elements of the truth. Like the characters Tan has created, Tan's own mother lived a life carefully veiled in secrecy. Living with an abusive first husband, she immediately fell in love with a Chinese American citizen working for the American embassy. Married at the time, the couple decided to commence on a correspondence that would last almost ten years until the time was propitious for Tan's mother Daisy to immigrate to California and join her fiancé John. Leaving behind three daughters who she would not see again for nearly thirty years, Daisy discarded her horrendous life as an abused wife and remarried, starting a new family in California. That she did not speak of these events for years, and Tan had to piece together her mother's life based on stories from family friends shows the strength that Daisy had in keeping such personal details from her children.

To me, Amy Tan appears to be a prolific writer of prose, but she admits that it takes her years to construct a novel albeit holding a degree in linguistics and English language. This could stem from the fact that her parents spoke a mishmash of Shanghainese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and broken English at home. Tan spoke in this conglomeration of languages until she began school, and her being multilingual effected her career as a student as well as a writer. When constructing a character for her novels, especially one from mainland China, Tan has to think in a variety of languages, even those she is not especially proficient in. Many of her

family friends became fluent in either Mandarin or Cantonese, but, because, her mother was not fluent in either language, but rather a distinct dialect of Shanghainese, she could not transmit language to her daughter, who in effect only became adept at speaking English. While Tan's immigrant parents were proud of their children as successful Americans, they did little to ensure that the next generation would continue to speak the language of their ancestors. This is reflected in both Tan's characters and the ever changing relationship she enjoyed with her mother as the years went by.

As one who has studied multiple languages and linguistics, I found Tan's writing process to be fascinating. She takes us back to when she was in kindergarten and a doctoral student engaged students who entered school reading in a study to see how successful they were. That Tan was in this study started her on the path to becoming a writer. I also found intriguing how Tan conversed with her mother in later years after her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and regressed to the Shanghainese of her youth. Mother and daughter were relegated to forming a new language of hand gestures and broken words in order to converse in a meaningful manner. All of these life experiences have made their way into Tan's novel and I enjoyed putting together the various life events with the stories found in her beautiful novels. As a result, I was able to finish this moving memoir in little more than a day as I immersed myself in Tan's writing process.

Another preferred writer of mine notes that reading leads to rereading that leads to writing. Going back through my reading notes, I have discovered that I have read a number of author memoirs focusing on the writing process over the last two years. Being that I have studied languages, I have always found the writing process to be fascinating, and, because I have read many of Tan's lovely novels, I thoroughly enjoyed entering her life and finding out about her family life and writing processes. While Tan and her family have experienced much sorrow, they have also experienced joy and love. This memoir was a labor of love and a joy to read. Until Tan is able to write her next novel, I am glad that I spent time with her on a more personal level.

4+ stars

Michael says

Ostensibly about Tan's origins as a writer, *Where the Past Begins* examines many facets of the novelist's life and career: her earliest memories, her relationship to her parents, her musical tastes, her interest in linguistics, her revision process. Interspersed between the memoir's main pieces are impressionistic sketches excerpted from Tan's journal. In her introduction, Tan frames the book as a kind of "unintended memoir," having emerged from her editor's desire to have her write an "interim book" between novels, and the book's loose structure reflects its spontaneous composition. Not everything in the book is spectacular, but the parts that shine do so brilliantly. Her memoirs of her mother and her father are especially moving, as are those detailing her childhood in general.
