

Introduction of Amy Tan

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It is an honour to be here and to introduce a great American writer - as the John Adams Institute always does.

Amy Tan was here at the John Adams before I arrived: she gave a talk on her incredibly successful book *The Joy Luck Club*. In 1993 it was made into a feature film directed by Wayne Wang.

After the huge success of *The Joy Luck Club* she has written many novels and shorter stories. Her new novel, *The Valley of Amazement*, was 7 years in the making, but it is a thick one.

Amy Tan was born in the United States in 1952. Her parents immigrated from China a few years earlier. They wanted her to become a doctor and a concert pianist. She herself dreamt of becoming an artist. She began writing fiction when she was 33. Now nearly 30 years later she has sold 5 million books in 35 languages. She is enjoying the celebrity life she deserves with her husband Lou whom with she has been together since 1970.

Amy Tan is known for her stories on the 'mother-daughter relationship'. She herself seems to prefer to say that she writes about identity. People are shaped by circumstances, she has said in one of the many interviews I saw online by way of preparation.

Amy loves to do research. Her own family background gave her enough ammunition to write many stories. Her mother Daisy had 3 daughters whom she left behind in China. Amy's grandmother killed herself when her mother was 9. This grandmother was the reason to write her new book, *The Valley of Amazement*.

Spanning 50 years and two continents (China en America), *The Valley of Amazement* is a take on three women. They are connected by blood but also by personal rebellion, betrayal and a mysterious painting called, 'The Valley of Amazement'.

It is, again, a story of mothers and daughters.

The book starts in 1905, in a first class courtesan house in Shanghai. It is run by Lulu Minturn, an American who fell in love with a Chinese man. Her daughter Violet was unaware of her father's identity until she gets left behind in Shanghai during the exodus of Americans when the Qing Dynasty falls. Violet is sold to a much lower-rated courtesan house and she survives thanks to an older courtesan who teaches her the business and the practical tricks of the trade.

Violet's life is not an easy one. She takes us on a journey of two decades steered by willpower, reckless desire and streetwise solutions. It is about hardship and love.

I was taken by the way Amy sketches life in China at the end of the Qing dynasty. It was a hard life, especially for women. It was a male dominated society and times were very uncertain. Corruption and turmoil led to civil war and later Japanese occupation.

Amy Tan has done her research well, although she herself states that she has *not* written an historical novel. She views *The Valley of Amazement* as a literary novel. I agree. However, her eye for detail brings the life of a courtesan in Shanghai beautifully and very vividly to life. You feel as frustrated as Violet when her baby is taken away from her. Abandonment is a recurring theme for our guest of tonight. She writes about abandonment and resilience in this novel, but also in her earlier works. It is a theme that is related to her own life and poses us questions about ours.

Amy is intrigued by how we become the persons we are. What circumstances make us who we are? I am intrigued by how Chinese she is. Born and raised in the US, but with sisters in China - sisters who led a totally different life from hers. What would have become of Amy if she had lived in China? Questions that are impossible to answer, but that may reveal part of Amy's own story and identity.

Amy?