

# AMY TAN

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Teaches Fiction, Memory,  
and Imagination



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# Meet Amy Tan

It took Amy more than three decades to find her true calling.

Now, thanks to her unflinching honesty and emotive prose, she's one of the most beloved (and successful) fiction writers in the world.



**AMY TAN HAS A KNACK FOR** making the best out of disappointment and pain. In her early 30s she was a successful freelance writer working upwards of 90 billable hours a week for various business clients, staving off burnout. When she chose to pursue fiction writing on the side to nurture her creative yearnings, she made an unusual move: she leaned into her early failings by hanging the rejection letters from literary journals and magazines on a bulletin board and reviewing them frequently.

'You have these demons', she says. 'And if you try not to see them, they're almost more terrifying. What I wanted to do was steel myself for rejection and to be able to say to myself that what I'm writing is

worthwhile for me, that I'm finding meaning in it.'

Of course, the rejection letters didn't last forever. Her breakout debut novel, 1989's *The Joy Luck*

**'Fiction is actually one of the best ways for finding truth.'**

**—AMY**

*Club*, was nominated for a National Book Award and, later, adapted into a hit feature film. Since then, she's published six bestselling novels, including *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, which she later turned into an opera libretto. She's also written two children's books and a memoir; stories and essays for *The New*

*Yorker*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *National Geographic*; and she's received a host of prestigious literary prizes. She is now one of the most celebrated contemporary fiction writers of her time and one of the most deft chroniclers of the immigrant American experience.

But even those struggles to get published, now a distant memory for Amy, were no match for what life had already thrown her way. She was born in Oakland, California, in 1952 to Chinese parents; as a child, she suffered the torment of her mother, a complicated and anxious woman named Daisy who'd left three children from another marriage behind in China. Daisy was prone to violence towards herself and others and threatened to kill



herself on numerous occasions. In the span of six months, both Amy's older brother and her father died of brain tumours while she was still in high school. Then, as a student at the University of California, Berkeley, her roommate was murdered, and Amy was forced to identify the body. All of these moments offered her inexhaustible wells of feeling to draw from as a fiction writer.

And yet, despite all of this, Amy is not known for being especially morbid. She's better known for her fine examinations of the dynamics between first-generation Asian

Americans and their parents, exploring the ways in which children – and anyone, really – forcefully shed some cultural and familial traditions while incidentally embracing others. Rather than explicitly recounting the narrative details of her upbringing, Amy has instead tapped into the emotions of the memories surrounding them.

This is the driving force behind her appreciation of fiction, and this is what she hopes to help you explore when it comes to your writing, too. She wants to dive into the central elements of the craft –

authorial voice, research and observation, character development, review and revision – while also having an honest, revealing discussion about the process of bringing a piece of writing to life. That includes her own battles with writer's block, self-doubt, and, yes, coping with the rejection letters. For Amy, writing is always personal.

'There are many people who misunderstand what fiction is,' she allows. 'They'll say, "Fiction is a bunch of lies." And I would say, "Fiction is actually one of the best ways for finding truth."

## WHILE THIS, ALSO THIS

Amy believes that the truths you find in fiction are about human nature. 'It is about the contradictions in which both sides are true', she says. 'Nothing is absolute, nothing is simple. Everything has a context, and in your life, you have had hundreds of thousands of contexts to draw from.' This is an excellent way to think about developing complicated, robust characters, and you can start by examining the people you know best. For example:

*While my husband hates violence, he loves hockey.*

*While my mother acted cheerful, she often cried.*

*While my best friend is afraid of public speaking, she loves doing karaoke.*

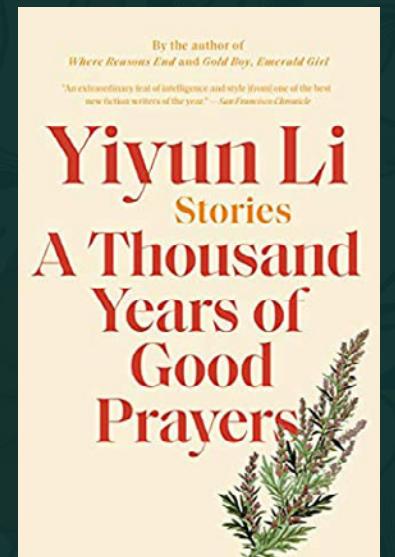
Write out a list of people in your life – relatives, lovers, siblings, exes, friends, teachers. Think about whom you adore, who hurt you, whom you lost, who makes you laugh. Now pick one. Can you identify any paradoxes that might describe that person?



# Character Studies

How three authors have captured a multitude of modern Chinese experiences (and created a new literary canon for Western readers)

AMY GREW UP IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA, and much of her literary legacy is rooted in her ability to reconcile Chinese heritage with uniquely American experiences. Her first published essay, the seminal ‘Fish Cheeks’, explores the dynamics of a Christmas meal through the eyes of a young Chinese girl whose crush has been invited to dinner (and the feelings that bubble up as her mother serves dishes like squid, tofu and the titular fish cheeks). The narrative demonstrates Amy’s keen ability to examine tradition and assimilation with a trained eye; the sharpness or blurring of cultural distinctions in her writing brings identity to the forefront. That voice and perspective helped establish a modern-day canon of Chinese American literature. In it, Amy and her peers, not to mention the unforgettable characters they write, exemplify the bridges that fiction can build.

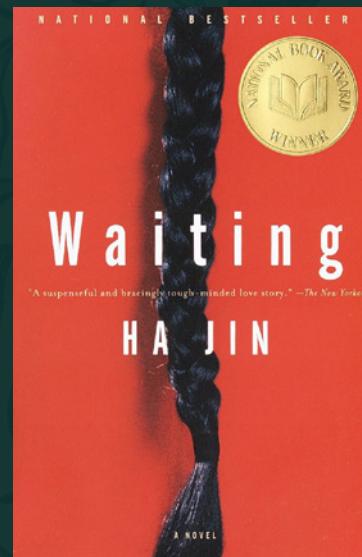


THE CHARACTER  
MR SHI

THE BOOK  
*A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*

THE AUTHOR  
Yiyun Li

Yiyun Li was born in Beijing and moved to the United States in 1996 to study immunology; she later earned her MFA from the prestigious Writers Workshop program at the University of Iowa. In a *New York Times* review of her first short story collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, Li was described as ‘a skilful double agent’: that is to say, she’s able to navigate the lines between the Chinese, the American, and the Chinese American experiences to poignant effect. The collection’s eponymous chapter tells the story of Mr Shi, a retired rocket scientist who visits his daughter in America while she’s going through a divorce. The piece explores the feelings of alienation and the communication barriers that exist between Mr Shi and his daughter. And yet, despite his emotional estrangement from his own child, Mr Shi manages to forge a relationship with an Iranian woman to whom he spills the secrets of his past (even though they don’t speak the same language). This interaction winds up being his most revelatory yet. It’s a story that underscores the way in which shared language and heritage can sometimes be a hindrance rather than a facilitator of intimacy. Crucially, while these themes are ostensibly universal, Li’s ethnographic flourishes ensure that the story – and the life of Mr Shi – maintains specificity in its perspective.

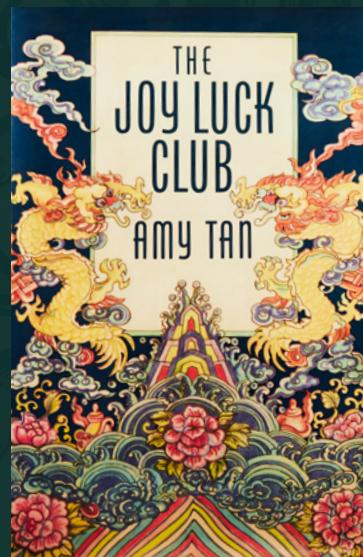


THE CHARACTER  
LIN KONG

THE BOOK  
*Waiting*

THE AUTHOR  
Ha Jin

Ha Jin arrived in the United States from China in 1985 and writes all of his fiction in English. But his stories – which are known for their spare, unflinching prose – take place in his native country. In 1999 he won the National Book Award for his novel *Waiting*, and in doing so he became only the third winner who isn’t a native English speaker. The novel follows an army doctor named Lin Kong who has married a village woman at the behest of his family. He eventually falls in love with a nurse and tries for 18 years – a period over which China changes dramatically – to divorce his wife. When he finally succeeds, he questions all of the choices he’s made in life. Set just after the Cultural Revolution, *Waiting* tells the story of a man trapped between the Old World and the future, someone trying to reconcile archaic rules and new opportunities. Like his protagonist, Jin served in the Chinese military, but he is less concerned with Maoism than he is with how it impacts the lives of his characters. At one point, Lin Kong reads *Leaves of Grass* – Walt Whitman’s famed poetic reflection on self-expression – and struggles to reconcile its meaning, as the book belongs to a high-ranking Communist official. Throughout *Waiting*, themes of self-sacrifice and devotion are laced with tensions between individuality and unity. Human beings, the author elegantly points out, are more complex than dogmas.



THE CHARACTER  
LINDO JONG

THE BOOK  
*The Joy Luck Club*

THE AUTHOR  
Amy Tan

Amy’s blockbuster novel tells the interlocking stories of four Chinese American immigrant mothers living in San Francisco. These women form a mah-jong group, the Joy Luck Club, through which their stories – and those of their American-born daughters – are told. Perhaps the most powerfully conflicted of these characters is Lindo Jong, one of the mothers and founding members of the club. After escaping a coerced marriage in China, she immigrates to the United States, where she gets remarried and has three children, including a daughter named Waverly. Lindo wants Waverly to choose her own path in life, as an American would, but she also tries to instil the discipline and fortitude in Waverly that she associates with a Chinese upbringing. The tangled web of intergenerational desire simultaneously creates a potent bond and a schism between mother and daughter. Lindo begins to see Waverly as an extension of herself – and her increasing alienation. ‘I think about our two faces,’ Lindo says. ‘I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better?’ She tells the story of returning to China after living in America and her attempts to downplay the Western elements of her appearance. ‘But still, they knew,’ she says. ‘They knew my face was not one hundred per cent Chinese.’



# Writing Memory

To illustrate the truth, illuminate the feelings of the past

**MOST WRITERS INEVITABLY** draw from their own lives in some form or fashion, particularly early on in their careers. This makes memory an essential part of the writing process. But memory isn't just about recalling vivid factual details, dates and places – it's about tapping into the emotions of an experience and using those emotions to inspire your work. When you focus on the emotion of a memory rather than its facts, you'll find that the entire world opens up to you.

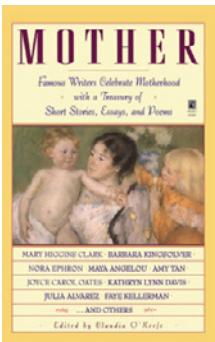
## THE BASICS OF MEMORY & EMOTION

Emotions are inextricably bound to memories at all stages of memory: recording a memory, storing a memory and recalling a memory.

- ✿ Research has shown that personal memories surrounding traumatic or dramatic public events – 'flashbulb memories' – are hardwired (and therefore much more reliable). For instance, you might not remember the details of a random Tuesday in September, but you can probably recall where you were on the morning of September 11, 2001.
- ✿ Positive memories tend to contain more sensorial and contextual details than neutral or negative memories. This might be why experiences generally seem better in retrospect than they do in the moment.
- ✿ Your ability to retrieve a memory can be contingent upon your current mood. When you start telling people about your past experiences – through speaking or writing – the words you choose can influence the way you remember the events. For example, if you tell someone that you were caught in a 'hurricane' rather than a 'thunderstorm', you might start to remember the original storm as being much more intense than it really was.
- ✿ Talking about memories actually changes them. When you start telling people about your past experiences – through speaking or writing – the words you choose can influence the way you remember the events. For example, if you tell someone that you were caught in a 'hurricane' rather than a 'thunderstorm', you might start to remember the original storm as being much more intense than it really was.

## FAMILY MATTERS

Many of our strongest memories involve our parents. Amy is known for exploring her own complicated familial bonds, often tying them into ideas about identity and personhood. Her 1990 essay 'Mother Tongue', which reflects on her experience as a bilingual child speaking both English and Chinese, is among her most beloved works. It's included in Claudia O'Keefe's anthology *Mother*, a collection focusing on the complex dynamics of maternal influence, alongside works by Maya Angelou, Mary Higgins Clark, Nora Ephron and others. If you're looking for examples of emotive personal writing about parenting, this is a fine volume to put on your bookshelf.



## THE HONEST TRUTH

Depending on your personal history, digging into the finer points of certain memories might feel daunting – or outright intimidating. Best advice? Follow Amy's lead and excavate the past honestly, thoughtfully and deliberately. If you're struggling to get started (or press onward), consider these exercises to cultivate some inspiration.

### WATCH AND LEARN

Observing how other storytellers approach a topic can sharpen your vision. Make a list of films that revolve around memory and emotion (e.g., Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*), then review them in your spare time. Take notes on the narrative structures, characters and imagery. What are the filmmakers trying to tell you about the relationship between your feelings and the past? How might these concepts apply to your own work?

### FACT FINDING

There are, as the saying goes, three sides to every story: yours, mine and the truth. The way you remember something might be totally different from how, say, your mother or spouse recalls the same event. Write down a handful of your strongest memories in as much detail as possible, then ask other people who were there to tell you their version of those same memories. Note the similarities and differences between your recollections. What does this reveal about the importance of perspective (and, perhaps, subjectivity) when reflecting on our personal history?

### MATERIAL EVIDENCE

Humans have an incredible ability to forge bonds with one another. We often do the same with our physical possessions. Choose an object that is extremely important to you – whether it's your bed, a family heirloom, an item of clothing or a simple trinket. Use your emotional attachment to that object as the jumping-off point for a 30-minute freewriting session. What does the item represent? When did it become significant? Has its meaning changed over time? Could it change in the future?

# Writing Is Rewriting

On the sacred relationships between writers and their editors



**AN EDITOR'S JOB IS MUCH** more complicated than revising the words of a writer. In fact, the best editors are those with the highest emotional intelligence – people who understand how to motivate cagey or anxious writers and coax them into putting pen to paper. Any good editor might also call themselves a therapist, a nanny, a friend, a disciplinarian, a snake charmer – or an agent of discovery.

**Robert Gottlieb** worked with literary greats like John Le Carré, Ray Bradbury, Cynthia Ozick and Doris Lessing. But he's perhaps best known for plucking Joseph Heller out of obscurity and editing *Catch-22*, which Gottlieb championed to publication (despite the objections of Simon & Schuster executives). He forged a lasting bond with Heller, who would later be nominated twice for National Book Award prizes. While editing Heller's novel *Something Happened*, Gottlieb had an epiphany about the main character, whose name was Bill Slocum. He told Heller, 'Joe, this is going to sound crazy to you but this guy is not a Bill...he's a Bob.' They changed the name to Bob, and it was 'absolutely amazing', Gottlieb told *The Paris Review*.

Sometimes an editor isn't just responsible for refining existing projects, but also for pushing writers to take on new ones. Amy has a close working relationship with her long-time editor **Daniel Halpern**, who for years tried to persuade her to write a memoir. She declined. He persisted, arguing that she should write a book about her creative process instead. He made her promise to email him 15 free-form pages per week. When all was said and done, these pages were more personal than Amy had anticipated; Halpern got the memoir he wanted. The resulting book, *Where the Past Begins*, became a springboard for *Unintended Memoir*, a documentary about Amy's life

and process, directed by the late James Redford. The film debuted at Sundance in 2021.

The celebrated activist and author Angela Davis has a similar tale about her editor: **Toni Morrison**. (Yes, *that* Toni Morrison.) Most readers don't realise that, before becoming a Nobel laureate and winning the Pulitzer Prize, Morrison was an influential book editor at Random House. In fact, she was one of the publishing house's first dozen editors and its first Black woman to hold that role. She encouraged Davis to write an autobiography at the age of 26, despite Davis' initial resistance. Morrison helped tease out this memoir not through conventional rewrites but by asking questions. 'She would say, "What did the space look like? What was in the room, and how would you describe it?"'

**Any good editor might also call themselves a therapist, a nanny, a friend, a disciplinarian, a snake charmer – or an agent of discovery.**

Davis recalled during a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The pair also had a more unconventional relationship (they were known for smoking cigars together), and when it came time for Davis to promote her work, Morrison accompanied her on book tours, serving as something of a guardian, teaching her to handle fans and media along the way.

Still, tough love can sometimes be more effective than a helping hand. For evidence, look no further

than the lore surrounding Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is so intense and long-running that it has come to feel like a national pastime. Lee's editor was a veteran named **Tay Hohoff**, who stumbled across the book's manuscript in 1957. While many editors are famed for their light touch and finesse, Hohoff earned respect for her brutality. (She was known for once lopping some 300 pages from one of her writer's biggest novels, cutting it from more than 500 pages down to 200.) Her revisions to *Mockingbird* were so all-encompassing that, when the book's original manuscript was published in 2015, under the original title *Go Set a Watchman*, the pages felt nearly unrecognisable. It solidified Hohoff's reputation as the 'invisible hand' behind the novel. As for the editing process, it was immersive, to say the least: legend has it that one night Lee found herself in tears and threw her manuscript out the window. When she called Hohoff, the editor demanded that Lee march out into the snow to retrieve it.

But in terms of swagger and toughness, even Hohoff must yield to **Gordon Lish**, who was charged with editing *Esquire* magazine's fiction section during a golden age. His aggressive cuts were outright rejected by stars like Don DeLillo and Vladimir Nabokov, but his approach honed the styles of minimalists like Raymond Carver. (Lish was responsible for editing Carver's breakout story, 'Neighbors', published in 1971. According to the literary scholar Carol Polsgrove, 'On several pages of the 12-page manuscript, fewer than half of Carver's words were left standing. Close to half were cut on several other pages.')

What advice might Lish offer you? Consider the crude but beautiful mandate he issued to writing students at Yale: 'Seduce the whole f—ing world for all time'.



# A Few Pointers for Editing Yourself

Regardless of whether you have a professional editor, you must devise a personal process for self-editing. Below, you'll find a basic, four-step method that's used – in some form or iteration – by many fiction writers like Amy. The finer points aren't as important as the approach: an open mind and honest perspective are key here. You may need to eliminate a character, discard a whole subplot, even change the major storyline. Don't feel bad; it's all part of the writer's journey. And, more often than not, it's an indicator of progress.

## 1. CONCEPTUAL EDIT

This twofold edit begins while you're writing, as you continually look back on earlier chapters and make adjustments. The second and more substantial part of the edit happens when you've finished. Print out the manuscript, and bloody the pages in red pen. Try rearranging chapters, cutting or adding scenes, leaving notes. (As you read the whole story at once, new insights will surface.) Trust yourself, and don't be too precious.

## 2. LINE EDIT

Once the manuscript feels conceptually cohesive, take a closer look at the language on a line-by-line basis. Focus on tightness and economy; eliminate redundancies, make each word fight for its place on the page. Be ruthless. You can usually cut (at least) 10 percent of your word count simply by trimming your sentences. Pick up a copy of *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers, 2nd Edition* by professional editors Renni Browne and Dave King. It's a go-to resource for learning how to polish your work like a professional.

## 3. CHAPTER EDIT

Go through your work section by section and ask yourself: what did I accomplish in this chapter? Write a short answer for each one. (Remember, some chapters exist to set up later chapters, which in itself is a valid objective.) The result should be an outline-type overview of your novel. You'll notice if a chapter is too busy (and needs to be broken up) or too dull (and should be consolidated into another chapter or eliminated altogether). This will help you control the pacing of your story.

## 4. GESTATION

Once you've finished your edit, put the manuscript on a shelf for a few days – or weeks. When you return to it, you'll bring a fresh perspective that will help you enormously in any future editing. Don't try to make everything perfect. Over-editing your novel can crush your original inspiration and damage the good work that you have already done.

## HOLD THAT THOUGHT

Amy didn't intend for *The Joy Luck Club* to be a novel; she actually set out to write a short story collection. She was following in the footsteps of giants: Edgar Allan Poe, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, James Baldwin and Joyce Carol Oates, all of whom helped shape short fiction as we know it today. But sometimes our plans go awry – in the best way. Ready to try your hand at writing some fiction of your own? Give this a go:

Answer the questions below as briefly as possible, writing down your first response. Then set a timer for 60 seconds. Use one of your answers to write the opening of a short story – one paragraph or a bit more. (Remember: you can start a short story at any point in the narrative.)

*What was the most humiliating thing you've ever done?*

*When was the last time you cried, and what caused it?*

*What was a moment that shocked you so much you were speechless?*

*Have you fantasised about revenge recently? Against whom?*

*What was a time you thought you were going to die?*

*Can you remember a time you said 'I love you' but didn't mean it?*

Now reset the timer for 30 minutes and finish the story. Don't overthink the prose or structure; you don't have much time, so just keep going. Write until the timer stops, then reflect. Could you expand this into a fully formed story? If not, which elements – a snippet of dialogue, a lush metaphor, a clever turn of phrase – might become a future plot point, chapter or setting in your novel? If nothing jumps out at you, stash these pages away for later. (You never know when inspiration will strike.) Take a break, then try again using one of your other answers.





# The Benefits of Journalling

Looking for a simple, practical way to improve your creative writing skills?  
Follow Amy's lead and start keeping a log of your life experiences

**At dusk,**  
I saw  
two females  
drink at  
the same  
patio  
feeder.  
Later,  
a male  
&  
female.  
The F  
watching

**JULY 28, 2020**  
**ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD**

last call at  
the bar. This  
is the magic  
hour of DUSK  
when the  
hummers  
must have  
their fill  
for the  
night.  
They are

more willing to drink from  
the feed or held in my hand. One  
young hummer (shorter bill, less  
bright coloring) had a hard time  
reaching the nectar, so I tilted  
the feeder and he drank happily.  
Adult males initially tried to  
chase me from feeder before settling.

**JOURNALLING, IN THE MOST**  
basic sense, is maintaining a written record of your thoughts, feelings, or observations. These can be short sentences, long paragraphs, even single words. Really, journalling can be whatever you want it to be, so long as it's a consistent document of self-expression.

Staring at a blank page can be unsettling, and the prospect of beginning a new journal may feel overwhelming. Don't sweat it. You

can freewrite, jot down bullet points, make a to-do list, or just scribble down observations and doodles. Like writing fiction, this can be a process of self-discovery, and it can make you a better writer.

Oftentimes it's a way to find beauty in the mundane; some entries might seem ordinary, but with distance, they become profound and potentially engender ideas for a story. Journalling can sharpen your observational skills, too, offering

a space for you to push yourself to describe the places you visit and, as Amy does, record dialogue you overhear or conversations you have with the people you meet. Documenting how people speak will help both with writing dialogue and with plotting your fiction.

If you're beginning a journalling practice for the first time, there is a wealth of techniques and methods for getting started. Here are a few choice methods.

## MAKE LISTS

When freewriting seems intimidating (or, you know, time-consuming), start with bulleted thoughts. This is called bullet journalling, and it's a way to get inspired. Make a list of words you love or a list of things in a room, and see where it takes you.

## GET AWAY FROM YOUR DESK

Go on a walk and bring your notebook. Take notice of the stimuli around you – trees, people, neighbourhoods, shopfronts. Ideas might come that wouldn't if you were hunched over the keyboard of your computer.

## WRITE A LETTER TO SOMEONE

Addressing one of your journal entries as if it's an unsent letter to someone else – real or imagined – is a great way to help organise your emotions logically and practise writing to a specific audience.

## TRY ART JOURNALLING

Amy often journals visually, sketching and drawing from memory or a photo (you can see one of her visual entries on page 15). This method forces her to pay attention to details – and exhibit patience.

# Adapting a Book for the Big Screen

Lessons learned from turning *The Joy Luck Club* into a Hollywood epic

**THERE'S A REASON** *Romeo and Juliet*, *Little Women*, *Frankenstein* and *Alice in Wonderland* have each been made into numerous film and television projects: truly great original stories are hard to come by.

But the adaptation process can be a land mine for writers and filmmakers alike. Adhere too closely to the original work, and you risk an awkward, stilted or boring project; stray too far, and you'll produce a film that feels hacky and betrays the trust of the readers. And writing a screenplay requires a completely different skill set from that of the novelist. Often, world-renowned novelists are brought into the early stages of an adaptation process, only to be replaced by a veteran screenwriter later on.

Amy is a notable exception. She played a crucial role in the adaptation of her landmark debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. The film was a success, earning nearly \$33 million in the U.S. against a \$10.5 million budget and appearing on the year-end best-of lists for prominent critics in 1993. In 2020, *The Joy Luck Club* was even selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress for being 'culturally, historically or aesthetically significant' – one of the format's highest honours.

For her work on the screenplay, Amy was nominated for both BAFTA and Writers Guild of America awards. Still, she admits to balking at the idea of her involvement: 'I said to the director and the screenwriter, "I know nothing about film. I do not want to participate. I like being home in my own world. Thank you, I trust you. Make a great film."'

But two of the filmmakers, director Wayne Wang and screenwriter Ron Bass, insisted that Amy cooperate and contribute to the project. 'They sensed that what I understood was the soul of this book', she says.

And so, against her initial instinct, Amy got to work on the screen adaptation. Quickly, she learned the difficulty of screenplay writing; as a rule, each page of text accounts for roughly one minute of screen time – which means that all novels must be streamlined in some capacity to fit a film's average length. (You might adore each of *The Joy Luck Club*'s 288 pages, but it's unlikely you would want to sit through a four-hour-plus film.)

This means the adaptation process, while potentially lucrative and creatively exciting, can also become a sort of masochistic exercise. Pacing can present a major challenge, and halving your own book demands extreme discipline;

doing so often demands narrative deconstruction, sometimes pulling apart the very exposition that made the novel and its characters compelling. As *Gone Girl* author Gillian Flynn told *Fast Company* in 2014, 'You have to make every scene not just do one thing but do about eight different things'.

In that respect, Amy learned to employ a number of creative workarounds while adapting *The Joy Luck Club*. Her biggest takeaway to pass along? Facial expressions and physical gestures are incredible allies in translating a book's storylines on screen in the most efficient way while also maintaining the emotional force originally expressed on the page.

Here, Amy points to one of the film's more powerful scenes, in which the character June is having a fraught and tearful conversation with her mother, Suyuan. June feels she's been a constant disappointment to her overly critical mother; they eventually reach a moment of catharsis, which is translated almost exclusively via facial expression. 'It would not have worked if I had extended it out', says Amy. 'This is what the beauty of film is. You don't have the luxury to explain anything. You have to see it.'

## SHOW, DON'T TELL

Given the intricate plotting and emotional depth of *The Joy Luck Club*, the big-screen adaptation of Amy's novel remains remarkably faithful to the source material. Take a weekend to closely reread the book; when you finish, watch the film immediately. Take notes on the differences. Which elements of the novel were eliminated? How did adding the farewell party scene allow for streamlining elsewhere? Where was voice-over utilised for efficient exposition, and to what effect? Examining the tactics Amy used in adapting *The Joy Luck Club* for cinemagoers, without losing the originality known to her readers, is almost a MasterClass unto itself.

If you're interested in writing or adapting a screenplay of your own, keep these six tips in mind as you dive into the process of your first draft:

### For the log line...

Work from a simple prompt: what is my story about? The log line is your reply, encompassing the plot's major dramatic question, written in a single sentence.

### When outlining...

Map the main events of your script in order, working within the three-act structure: inciting incident → conflict or struggle → resolution or change. Each event should be concise (e.g., 'Waverly brings Rich to dinner') and informed by the major dramatic question.

### In the treatment...

Create a beefed-up prose version of your outline, one that reads more like a short story. Your artistic vision comes into focus here; build out the world and characters as lush as you'd like.

### While writing the script...

Keep it in the present tense and don't worry too much about editing; let your ideas flow, then restructure them once everything is on the page.

### The formatting...

Industry standard is 12-point Courier font, a 2.54-cm right margin, a 3.81-cm left margin, and 2.54-cm margins at the top and bottom. You can buy screenwriting software (Final Draft, Celtx) or find a free script template online.

### During the edit...

The goal is clarity. Don't focus on perfection; keep your attention on the story. Identify problem areas (sections that are sloppy, overwritten, incongruous), and mark them with a coloured highlighter. Set a goal for yourself to get the entire script back to colourless.



# The Art of Procrastination

In defence of putting it off until tomorrow – and improving your writing along the way

MARK TWAIN ONCE WROTE that you should ‘never put off till tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow just as well’. It’s a quote that haunts writers suffering from the universe’s most familiar and perplexing affliction: procrastination. The behaviour has spawned entire genres of academic research and thousands of articles (not to mention more than a few self-help empires). It is perhaps the most daunting self-inflicted spiritual enemy of anyone trying to get words down on paper.

**People tend to assume that procrastination is a matter of laziness. In reality, it's a deeply emotional response.**

And yet, procrastination may not be the enemy, after all – perhaps it’s just a misunderstood part of the process. Anyone who’s ever accomplished a complex intellectual feat understands that it naturally involves periods of repose and rumination. Studies actually show that ample rest is a key part of the creative process. In fact, there are

certain forms of procrastination that can stimulate the creative parts of our minds and get us closer to our goals.

So perhaps we shouldn’t strive to eliminate procrastination but instead procrastinate more effectively? Productivity impresario David Allen, author of the celebrated self-help business book *Getting Things Done*, suggests engaging in activities that require minimal cognitive effort but still provide a sense of accomplishment: folding laundry, cleaning off your desktop, organising binders. Ira

Glass, the host of NPR’s *This American Life*, is known to procrastinate by doing administrative tasks, like paying bills

and reviewing contracts. Meanwhile, in a recurring blog series on *Slate*, various writers pay homage to their diverse and ingenious tactics for putting off work – cataloguing the careers of middling baseball players, watching nu-metal concert videos, exploring the Wikipedia page for ‘People Who Disappeared Mysteriously’.

But for those of us who want a more meditative approach, Amy is the ultimate expert. Her favourite forms of procrastination do not involve paperwork or mindless scrolling, or even playing card games or reading. Rather, Amy looks to nature. She goes bird-watching. She swims with sharks. She draws. She even had a Tumblr account dedicated to these evasions, where she quickly noted her thoughts – which often justify the inherent value of putting things off till tomorrow.

‘When I am spending too much time drawing,’ she writes, ‘I tell myself that I am strengthening my observational skills, which I will use later when I get back to writing.’

People tend to assume that procrastination is a matter of laziness. In reality, it’s a deeply emotional response – to boredom, to insecurity, to fear of failure. Maybe you need something soothing, like Amy’s bird-watching, or peripherally creative, like her drawing. Maybe it’s as simple as dusting, or organising your wardrobe. Short- and long-term satisfaction aren’t mutually exclusive. Allowing yourself a respite might simply be one part of making the words flow.



# Naming Rites

The ultimate (and unexpected) honour for authors who love the natural world

**NOTABLE WRITERS RECEIVE** all kinds of accolades: literary awards, honorary degrees, prestigious appointments at universities, even Nobel prizes. But there's another, less conventional, if perhaps more enduring, style of tribute: naming animal species (or natural wonders) after successful scribes. It's a practice that's stranger than fiction. And it's happened to Amy.

How? Well, she's famously enamoured with the living world and maintains friendly ties to Mark Siddall, curator of invertebrate zoology at New York's American Museum of Natural History, whom she has accompanied into the field. Animals are often mentioned in her books, notably in her fifth novel, *Saving Fish From Drowning*, in which she makes several references to jungle leeches. So, in 2016, after researchers discovered a new type of Australian leech, Siddall's team decided to name it after Amy. Thus, the *Chtonobdella tanae* came to be.

With her induction into taxological history, Amy joined the likes of Vladimir Nabokov (*Nabokovia*, a butterfly genus)

and Bram Stoker (*Draculoides bramstokeri*, an arachnid), among other literary invertebrates. The beetle *Darwinilus sedarisi* is a mash-up of two nature-loving authors, Charles Darwin and David Sedaris. And for his poem 'The Road Not Taken', Robert Frost is honoured by way of *Aleiodes frosti*, a type of wasp.

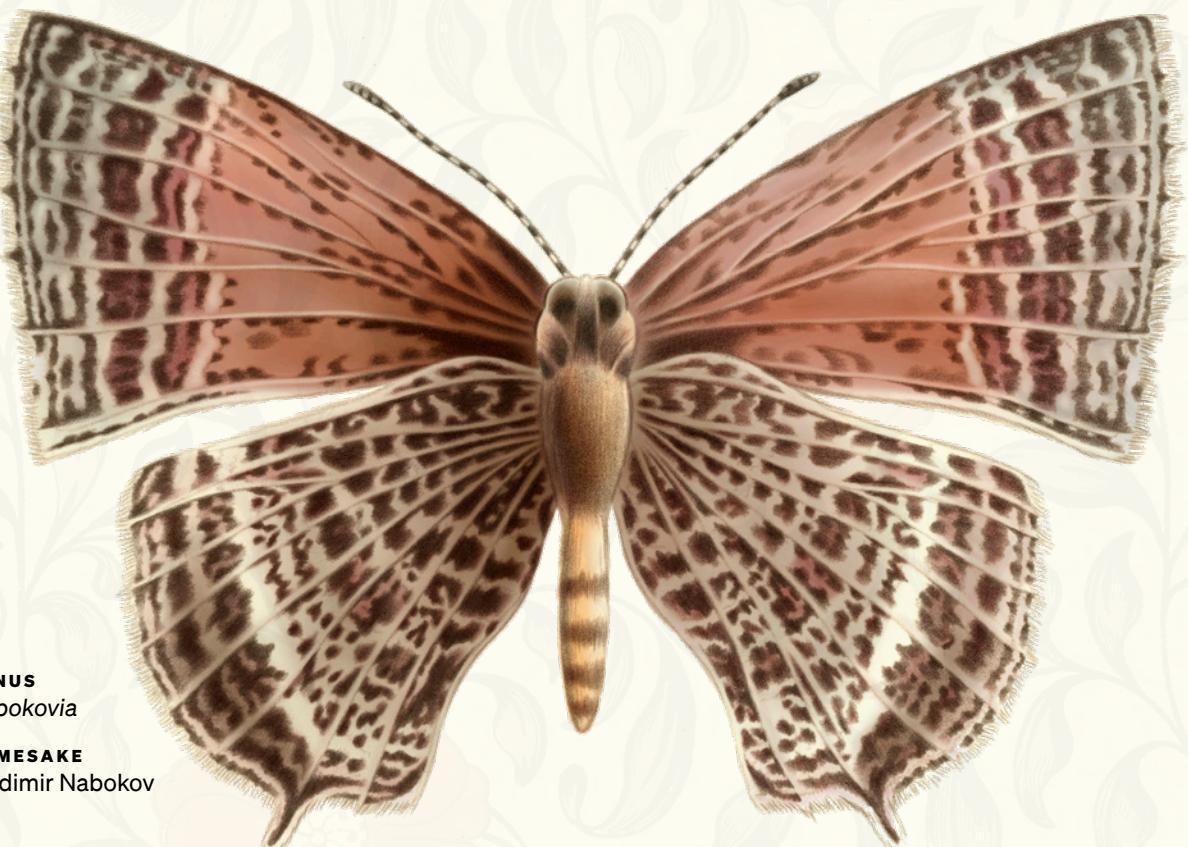
## The beetle *Darwinilus sedarisi* is a mash-up of two nature-loving authors, Charles Darwin and David Sedaris.

Fittingly, the creature's larvae emerge from their host in a way that is entirely unique from other members of the species.

You can probably guess the animal named after *Moby-*

*Dick* scribe Herman Melville: researchers have studied the fossil of one very special (and now extinct) type of whale; based on their findings, they estimated that it would have been more than 13 metres long. Hence, *Leviathan melvillei*. Equally as appropriate, *Crichtonsaurus*, a dubious genus of herbivorous dinosaur, is named for Michael Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park*.

The tradition isn't limited to terrestrial life, either. Two asteroids discovered on the same day in March 1981 are named Asimov and Clarke, after the great sci-fi writers Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke. Both the Japanese novelist Eiji Yoshikawa and the *Lord of the Rings* author J.R.R. Tolkien have eponymous geological sites near Mercury's north pole. And in 2012, NASA paid homage to Ray Bradbury, whose 1950 sci-fi classic, *The Martian Chronicles*, helped readers envision life on other planets; upon touchdown of the Mars rover *Curiosity*, the team tweeted that the landing spot would thereby be called Bradbury Landing.



# Required Reading

Amy picks some books for aspiring writers

**IT'S ALWAYS BETTER TO** develop your own style rather than imitate the styles of your favourite authors. But in closely examining the work of others, you can start learning storytelling principles and writerly techniques, and begin to employ those insights into your own work. Looking for some foundational analytical fodder? Here are a few recommendations straight from Amy:

✿ ‘To understand how a strong character’s **day-to-day life can seamlessly encompass the complications of war**, read Rabih Alameddine’s *An Unnecessary Woman*.’

✿ ‘To feel how stories can **gradually build tension and unveil the horrors of social injustice**, read Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.’

✿ ‘For a **powerful beginning that promises a lot of story and delivers**, read *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez.’

✿ ‘To see **how characters are tied to a sense of place**, read Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain* and *That Old Ace in the Hole*.’

✿ ‘To understand **how autobiographical fiction and memoir are similar and different**, read Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*.’

✿ ‘To understand how a novel can **capture our deepest emotions**, read *The Last Song of Dusk* by Siddharth Dhanvant Shangvi.’

✿ ‘To gorge on **exquisite prose and literary style**, read every line of Nabokov’s *Lolita*.’

✿ ‘To recognise the **advantages of particular points of view**, including that of an omniscient ghost narrator, read my novel *Saving Fish From Drowning*.’

✿ ‘To understand how rich characters and intimate situations can also **mirror the large themes of history**, read *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie. He is also a master in style.’

✿ ‘To recognise how the **observation of small moments can lead to whole stories**, read Lydia Davis’ *Collected Stories*.’

✿ ‘For understanding the **richness of strong characters linked by community**, you’ll be inspired by *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich.’



## PERSPECTIVE OPPORTUNITY

In creative writing, point of view is the eye through which you tell a story.

There are three main types – first person ('I', 'me', 'we'), second person ('you'), third person ('he', 'she', 'they') – and Amy says choosing between them can be incredibly difficult when you're starting a new story. She often gravitates to first person, as it allows for self-discovery and intimacy, putting the reader inside a character's body. But as a writer, she's also drawn to omniscient third person, positioning the storyteller as a godlike creator, keyed into the characters' motivations, intentions and, crucially, their secrets. The second person, used correctly, can be a powerful tool as well.

Amy recommends a writing exercise to explore how different points of view can be used for telling different stories. Take a simple, powerful sentence and iterate from each perspective:

**First person:** They said there were pirates, but I/we did not believe them.

**Second person:** They said there were pirates, but you did not believe them.

**Third person:** They said there were pirates, but he/she/they did not believe them.

Now, write the beginning of a story – or a few paragraphs about what the story would include – for each iteration. Investigate the resulting narratives and their diverting directions. Are we following one character or a group? Why didn't the character(s) heed this warning? Did it come to fruition, and, if so, to what end? Note the emotional scope and depth. How are your character(s) allowed to express their thoughts and feelings? Which point of view might work best for a rumination on fear? For a comment on democracy? For a farcical comedy?

By examining these ideas, Amy says, you can better understand the power of perspective – how much leeway you’re given to tell a story based on point of view, using a single line.





## METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING

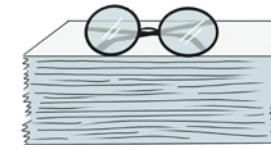
Amy is known for her focused language and deft word choice. She's fascinated by the associations our minds make and the metaphors that result from these connections. This is one reason she avoids clichés; they are somebody else's associations, making them inherently less personal – and, since the reader has likely heard them before, inherently less powerful. To practise making fresh connections, she recommends a simple, interactive exercise: learn about a new subject from an expert.

Pick a complex topic – say, how an automatic transmission shifts gears or the way a digital camera takes a photo – about which you know nothing. Have the expert explain it to you. Keep asking questions, using comparisons (e.g., ‘Is it like this?’) and noting their responses (‘Well, not quite. It’s more like this...’) until you’ve got a firm grasp of the concept. Then consider all the ways you – and your expert – have used language to describe the same thing.

Crafting rich metaphors, Amy believes, demands this same type of work. In practising, you open up different pathways of understanding – and you might be surprised by the connections you make. The next time you’re writing, pay attention to the many possibilities language affords us in conveying other complex subjects: beauty, danger, loss and hope.

# How to Find a Writing Group

Banding together with like-minded creatives will only improve your work



**WHETHER YOU'RE A PUBLISHED AUTHOR OR CRAFTING YOUR FIRST BOOK,** a writing group can provide encouragement, inspiration and support. Meeting regularly to read, discuss and critique one another's work, these storytelling communities offer constructive feedback to help their peers shape their stories. Here are five ways to find a writing group:

### FIND A GROUP NEAR YOU

Start by checking listings at your community centre and local library – common gathering places for literary talks or groups. In general, writing groups have a regular time and day that they meet. Find one that fits your schedule.

### GO ON A RETREAT

Unlike most other options, this one will cost money and likely involve travel. But if you have some time to get away, a retreat where you can dedicate a week or more to just writing (and connecting with others) can be a creative wellspring.

### JOIN ASSOCIATIONS

There are numerous guilds with local chapters. Regional bodies, like the Independent Writers of Southern California, offer workshops, classes, lectures and writing groups, while organisations like National Novel Writing Month often meet up at local libraries. You can also join genre-specific entities, like Mystery Writers of America.

### FIND VIRTUAL GROUPS

If you'd prefer to keep it remote, check out the online critique groups on websites like Scribophile or Critique Circle. You can also explore message boards and social media to connect with people over chat or video.

### START YOUR OWN

Recruit other local writers by posting a note online at a coffee shop, or in a library or by asking members of your book club. One advantage of starting your own group is that you can make it what you want; it might be a general group that welcomes all, or specific to a certain genre or experience level. Pick a day, find a location, and start building your network.

# CREDITS

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