

AMERICAN

LITERATURE

# Women Writers Reflect American Diversity

**1978–2000** The broadening of opportunities for American women that began in the 1970s is as evident in literature as it is in other fields. Toni Morrison, Mary Oliver, Nikki Giovanni, Amy Tan, Anne Tyler, Alice Walker, Marge Piercy, Sandra Cisneros—these are just a few of the talented women novelists and poets who reflect the multicultural nature of the American identity. These women's writing shares a common characteristic—that of conveying the American experience through the exploration of personal memories, nature, childhood, and family.



## ◀ NIKKI GIOVANNI

In the late 1960s, Nikki Giovanni won instant attention as an African American poet writing about the Black Power movement. Since then her poetry has often focused on childhood, family ties, and other personal concerns. In the following poem, Giovanni deals with individual empowerment—even under less than ideal circumstances.

### Choices

if i can't do  
what i want to do  
then my job is to not  
do what i don't want  
to do

it's not the same thing  
but it's the best i can  
do

if i can't have  
what i want then  
my job is to want  
what i've got  
and be satisfied  
that at least there  
is something more  
to want

since i can't go  
where i need  
to go then i must go  
where the signs point  
though always understanding  
parallel movement  
isn't lateral

when i can't express  
what i really feel  
i practice feeling  
what i can express  
and none of it is equal  
i know  
but that's why mankind  
alone among the mammals  
learns to cry

—Nikki Giovanni,  
"Choices," from *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* (1978)

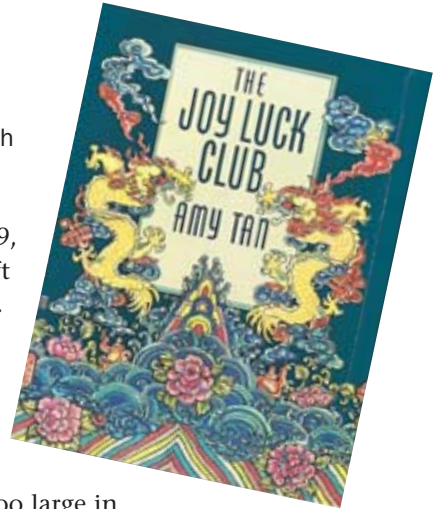


## AMY TAN

A native of Oakland, California, Amy Tan draws on personal experiences in *The Joy Luck Club*, a series of interconnected stories about four Chinese-American daughters and their immigrant mothers. The four mothers establish a club for socializing and playing the game of mahjong.

My mother started the San Francisco version of the Joy Luck Club in 1949, two years before I was born. This was the year my mother and father left China with one stiff leather trunk filled only with fancy silk dresses. There was no time to pack anything else, my mother had explained to my father after they boarded the boat. Still his hands swam frantically between the slippery silks, looking for his cotton shirts and wool pants.

When they arrived in San Francisco, my father made her hide those shiny clothes. She wore the same brown-checked Chinese dress until the Refugee Welcome Society gave her two hand-me-down dresses, all too large in sizes for American women. The society was composed of a group of white-haired American missionary ladies from the First Chinese Baptist Church. And because of their gifts, my parents could not refuse their invitation to join the church. Nor could they ignore the old ladies' practical advice to improve their English through Bible study class on Wednesday nights and, later, through choir practice on Saturday mornings. This was how my parents met the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs. My mother could sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English. Or at least, my mother recognized the numbness in these women's faces. And she saw how quickly their eyes moved when she told them her idea for the Joy Luck Club.



—Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)

## SANDRA CISNEROS ►

Sandra Cisneros is one of many Chicana writers to win fame in recent years. In *The House on Mango Street*, she traces the experiences of a poor Hispanic girl named Esperanza (Spanish for *hope*) and her warm-hearted family. Nenny is her sister.



### THINKING CRITICALLY

- 1. Comparing** From these selections, what can you infer about women's experiences in American life today? Cite passages to support your response.



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R8.

- 2. INTERNET ACTIVITY** [CLASSZONE.COM](http://CLASSZONE.COM)

Visit the links for American Literature to find and choose selections for an anthology of writing by three contemporary American women. Write a "capsule biography" summarizing each writer's background and achievements.

—Sandra Cisneros  
*The House on Mango Street* (1989)