



Library podcast

Amy Tan Discusses Her Memoir "Where the Past Begins"

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[00:00:38] Hello. Hi everybody. Hello

[00:00:45] Yeah hello. Thank you so much for your patience as we tried to get as many people in the room as possible. Can you hear me in the back up in the overflow section. Yes I'm seeing lots of waves that's great. Thank you all for coming tonight. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at The Seattle Public Library. And welcome to this evening's program with Amy Tan and Laurie Frankel. I'd like to thank our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and then also thank the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Thank you as well to our program partner Elliott Bay Book Company for being here tonight. Finally we are grateful to The Seattle Public Library Foundation private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors help the library provide free programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. So to library foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much and let's give them a round of applause now with further without further ado please help me welcome Rick Simonson and from Elliott Bay Book Company who's going to introduce Amy Tan. Thank you Stesha and thank all of you very much for being here as all of you who went through the long lines and everything to get in and be in.

[00:02:04] I've been fortunate if I think to have introduced Amy Tan for each of her least of all of her adult books. And some of you know this story in fact it ran the Seattle Times that her very first appearance ever for the Joy Luck Club in March of 1989 happened in the basement of Elliott Bay. And it was not this big a crowd but it wasn't there was an audience there's an awareness from the get go as to the literary excellence and the nature of the story writing she was she had done. And you could feel it that night. And it's been such ever since and there is a tendency to think she's written so many books because her books have this great kind of awareness of them in the in the culture each one that's come out. There have been six novels The Kitchen God's Wife The Hundred Secret Senses the bone daughter's Bone setters daughter saving fish from drowning. And the most recent the last novel The value of amazement which came out four years ago plus the Book of autobiographical autobiographical essays called The Opposite of Fate. It's a nonfiction book. She's

here with tonight an amazing book entitled Where the past begins and the subtitle is A writer's memoir. And it is a chronicle of her writing life although if you read you're also not sure if it's going to burst into song or into artwork because Amy draws on on other forms of expression and writes about that writing is not the only form she's done. And it's among the many surprises delights and pleasures of this book which looks a lot of her family's story and her own story and does so in a form of various stories and and many other forms of writing are her own. But from different periods and so you have her perspective on her past and her future when she's 25.

[00:04:05] On when she's 40 when she's 50 when she's 60 I mean all these different ways all these things seem and you get her form of insight. And again written in great sense of story. So tonight she will be here with us. And with her on up here will be Laurie Frankel the wonderful Seattle writer author of three novels most recently the tell it no seeds I was get this mixed up this is how it always is a wonderful novel that was in fact the launch of the paperback will be here in the spring. Another thing to say this about Amy though being here tonight she this book was published one week ago it's already going getting on. It just we're just came through it'll be on the New York Times bestseller list you know right from the. Again from the get go but she's not going to many cities and for that for doing this she lives in terms of psycho so of course there. And she's published in New York so of course there. But she's only going to four other cities and this is one of them.

[00:05:07] So it feels like an extra special gift and boon that she is is doing this when we are all deeply grateful for it. So tonight Amy and Laurie will be up here. They'll. Have a conversation go where they go. There will be a point where questions are taken and these will be in the form of written questions that people for the library will run up and down the stairs and get a good workout and collect them and then Laurie will read Them to Amy up here and then following that the book signing we have copies of Amy's books down here at this table and you get them here in the lines out there and especially used to be a bookseller so she knows this whole book drill quite well for all of us again at the Seattle Public Library from Elliott Bay Book Company. We thank you all very much for being here. And now Ashley please join giving a great Seattle welcome to wonderful writer Amy Tan in in company with Lori Frankel thank. I

[00:06:15] Always imagined this room's gonna be empty so glad you're all here.

[00:06:20] Yeah. And I don't think I've ever seen this room this fall. It's really wonderful that you all are here. Thank you so much for coming. Hope you feel.

[00:06:29] I feel nervous and giddy and honored to be doing this. I hope you all feel nervous and getting an honored also. I do I Geek Dad a little bit on this back. The other thing I want to say is I feel very smug because I've read it and you well haven't yet because it only came out last week and and I feel very envious of you because you you haven't yet to read. I made pages and pages and pages of notes and some of them were just just for me for my writer herself. But I also have lots of questions but I'm also mindful that you all have lots of questions and we promise to save time for them. But I thought we should start at the beginning so

[00:07:11] One of the things that I saw the very first thing I underlined and I underlined a lot is is this notion you say much of what I think I remember is in accurate.

[00:07:24] And I think that's such a wonderful thing for a fiction writer but a slightly less good thing for a memoirist and a really brave and maybe even scandalous thing to admit.

[00:07:34] On page three of your memoir and I wondered if you could start off just by talking about the difference between the act of remembering for novel writing versus the act of remembering for memoir writing.

[00:07:49] Well what. What I meant by that actually is that we continue to revise what we think and what we so that by a certain period in life my notion of what happened when I was younger has been distorted by who I am at the present moment. And so as an example. I for example thought that my father loved me the most and that I was the favorite and I discovered and looking through different materials that wasn't the case. So it's it's not only a failure of memory. The original memory but also understanding was there. Now in fiction you get to make it up of course but you have to have the same qualities of memory you have to have it be believable. Everything that I think is believable. It may not however be the actual correct version of what happened in the in the present moment. That was the past.

[00:08:51] Right. Right. Because when you talk about how your mother had this idea that stories could change the past which is a really remarkable idea. You know we have this notion that storytelling can change the present and the present could use some changing and certainly we believe that storytelling can change the future. But storytelling changing the past seems like a completely different idea to me.

[00:09:14] Well it had to you know the way she thought of it it had to do with the way that we witness something or the way that we feel about the consequences of what happened. And so she was referring to her life the daughter of a concubine who killed herself and the shame that she had her mother had to bear when I was writing about this. Her brother said What do you tell her. These useless things she can't change the past. And my mother said my mother who kept this a secret from me. Most of my childhood until you know that I was in my 20s. She said to him she can change the past she can tell everybody. She can tell everybody what my mother suffered. And that's how she can change the past that my grandmother wouldn't die. This anonymous tragic pitiful creature she would be remembered as a strong woman who had injustices inflicted on her yes that was one of maybe a dozen times I wept during while I was reading this book.

[00:10:20] You want to talk a little bit about I mean I have so many questions about the difference between writing a novel because you are an expert at writing a novel. You have written so many wonderful novels and writing a memoir. You have this you have this part where you talk about losing your voice on the anniversary of your friend's death and I think Oh I know someone that happened to and then I thought No way. I read that in a book and I. Read your book. About the difference between writing fiction and reading and writing something like this

[00:10:55] You know that this book was both one of the hardest things I've ever written but also one of the most natural. I wrote this most of this in a fugue state. And it was out of sheer panic that I had to do something and get it out by a deadline. And I almost think that what came out of this is more. True in a in a if you were to take a narrative line and try to find it you know which you try to do with a novel you have to pull this narrative line out. This just came pouring out of me in almost a natural narrative line because I here's the thing I did not know what was going to happen next. Oftentimes I was finding out things about my family through these boxes of memorabilia at the time I'm writing so I didn't know why my father lied in a particular instance. And I pick a document out and I find out where an illegal family and we can be deported for example novels have that kind of suspense where you don't know and this is this is the thing about writing to a novel is that you have to have a certain unpredictability. This is part of originality. You have to have unpredictability as you move forward in your narrative so that you are discovered discovering something new. At the same time. You are writing and yet you have to know what you're doing. So it's this paradox. It's it's it's crazy making you know you can go insane when writing for that reason. This one I started off insane and I just continue to write

[00:12:47] Awesome. Yes okay. I got to ask about those boxes.

[00:12:49] I want to talk about the boxes of stuff the book for those of you who have not yet got your hands on it is full of photos and drawings and documents and letters.

[00:13:00] They're really precious really remarkable objects and you talk a lot about the emotion of of finding these boxes and and going through them.

[00:13:12] I wonder about the decision to put them in to put them in as is Yeah I mean you can't edit like you can do with fiction.

[00:13:25] You can't make your parents sound better or worse. There were diaries my father's diaries every year there were report cards letters between my mother and me. And you know I was I was looking at all of this and trying to both digest what I was finding and then write. It took me probably three or four of these before I achieved a rhythm I would just take something and say I want to write about this now. Everything that I wrote did I'm not everything made it into this book I wrote however 15 to 30 new pages a week. If you can believe that and those pages pretty much stayed in in its structure and its form the way that you see in the book. That was my decision I would have revised this book extensively if it were not for my editor. You think of editors as wanting you to make it better. And my editors simply wanted to publish it right away.

[00:14:28] So I I do have to say but I am not proud of the writing that is in this book. But it just came out in that particular way.

[00:14:41] You know I wondered with some of the the letters that I should block something out and I just I just left it in because this is like a record. This is my one chance to make a record of who I am as a writer. So there was an underlying reason there were a number of reasons but one of the

underlying reasons is that people have always you know thought of me in a certain way as this mother daughter expert for one thing or that I'm writing about immigrant tales and not really understanding who I am as a writer. So I thought if I put it in a book it's indisputable who I am you know. And that way there's you know over the everybody thinks you're supposed to save your papers and give them to some library and a thought. No I'm not going to do that. I'm going to burn those things.

[00:15:32] And the record of who I am is right here the way I wanted it put it down OK because that makes me wonder do you think of the letters as being more like photographs or more like writing on the letters.

[00:15:45] Definitely writing. It's communication and what I discovered is communication that you that is very different from what you have face to face with somebody. It can be confessional confrontational and that's why I put that in there a lot. The letters from my mother and me as well as the letters between me and my editor and I learned something quite important to me as a fiction writer and that is the way that I write emails is spontaneous is completely off the top my head is completely and edited it's every random thought that just happens to come and it may be something about the book but it also could be something that happened that day with my dog and my editor seemed to like these emails so we wrote a we have a bet at the time of the writing we had about 15000 of these emails. A lot of them were really boring they were things like where do you want to beat you know or what time is sort of like as a mess. But there were ones that really I thought revealed the process that we had as writer and editor. He's a very special editor by the way. I don't think most editors would have indulge me with you know just running off spouting. But they are not the kinds of things that I would say to him face to face and we get together and we're friends and we have dinner. But I can put down there. But I would never say to somebody. So that is the notion of what I what I had. Taken and when I reviewed all this letters from my mother which are. Confrontational or confessional and very honest and also kind of she's very spontaneous but saying she lost her purse or she's just going on you know wandering which is what I do as well. And and then that. Sort of a lack of self-consciousness.

[00:17:42] And this is this is something I think we novelists have to do is to lose that self-consciousness consciousness if we can and simply write off the top of our heads and then go back and throw it away or keep what's good about it yes it's very it's a very interesting book in that I'm following along and it's doing its thing and I think OK I know what you're doing I understand what this book is doing and then all of a sudden three quarters of the way through it becomes epistolary and that's I don't think I've ever read another book where where that happened it was very surprising. It felt like e-mail. It felt like you know this thing that had just popped up in my inbox. Going forward we'll talk a little bit about the. It's a very interesting format for for a memoir and a very interesting relationship to have with your editor because the editor author relationship is always a partnership but but not not like that and not that early in the creative process.

[00:18:42] Well you know the emails do talk where we're getting to know each other. Siege you see this progression of emails and then you see. We're talking about food we're you talking about the

book about my doubts about terrible writing I think I've done and. That that is all there. But what I did in taking that spontaneous off the top of the head writing was to do an exercise in a couple of places. And one was to take for example a memory a very vague memory and just right off the top of my head where that memory would go based on the visceral feelings that I still had that were left over I just found that they were still there. So I just followed them and it was about a time I was in the car my brothers and I were in the car with my parents and my mother was upset and I started noticing these little things about her I was very observant you know how what the tone of her voice was whether she made eye contact with my father whatever it was what dress she was wearing was her hair nicely done. And then just getting really nervous and I followed the you know the my hands where my hands could I couldn't make a fist. And that brought back more memories. And so you'll see there's there's this writing exercise but it takes me back to a memory where I am right there and that is basically from start to finish the way I wrote it when I sat down it's a little that the editing that was done really was to simply shorten it. Yeah it and it went on a little too long as it was but it was such a complete experience that I I wanted to keep it as is yes it is.

[00:20:36] It is. That's exactly what it is.

[00:20:39] It is reading it is the experience of watching someone remember something and and that and that has never happened to me before before.

[00:20:49] Yeah you know it's sort of sometimes I felt like this was you know three faces of E. You know we have this psychological confession that is is coming out and I'm lying on a couch and all this memory stuff is coming out. The only difference is that. I'm not doing this so that I can have resolution or epiphany and you know suddenly I'm healed. You know I'm not looking for that as a writer. My my message as a writers to stay damaged to stay disturbed because this is your material as a writer. You have to be confused. You have to be conflicted contradictory. You have to ask questions and always be curious and if you're happy it just doesn't work right.

[00:21:36] Sure. It's really it's great.

[00:21:42] You talk about you talk a lot. You there are a lot of drawings in here and you talk a lot about about drawing.

[00:21:51] And one of the things you said was that people recommend that you draw the bird and then the eye but you like to draw the eye. And then the bird.

[00:22:00] All this is fantastic. So that the bird can watch her draw it which is awesome.

[00:22:06] I wonder if that's the way if you feel like that's the way you write to you right. You write the eye before you write the bird huh.

[00:22:12] That's an interesting question. Well the question would be who is the eye. And in this book definitely the eye was me or actually the eye was me at different ages. I'm reflecting when I choose a

memory I am exactly that person and I. It was a very strange state to be in because I would go into that. Child. And that it would recognize the child was a progression of. Of all these parts of me up until this point. So it really is me. But I have the hindsight and I had to have the immediacy of. Of the past but I had the other part as well. So the eye really was for the child. I was writing about in the novels it's been different. It was my grandmother and my mother were most typically my readers. The eye looking at me and I had to have the notion of an eye because that was the truth detector is going to be that we're on public radio's I couldn't use the other one which is. Like detector. So. I had to have. That was I saying something was not true and what I mean by that is has nothing to do with facts. It has to do with is this what you really feel. Is this what it really means. And so that's important to the AI and for the child that I was writing for. That was equally important yeah.

[00:23:52] It's so interesting to think about them. The pursuit of truth in memoir versus in fiction especially if you say things and you do such as I distrust photographs then the idea of archival changes completely.

[00:24:10] I know you think photographs are indisputable. There they are there. You know you can't alter them. They're frozen celluloid or whatever it is now digital. But in fact what you don't see is the context of the photo like who put the photo at the supposed group together and posed together who is not in the picture who is smiling only because the photographer said to smile what happened before immediately and what happened after. So I didn't take photos by looking at this. I didn't take photos as being the truth of what happened. But it was evidence of certain elements for example. I didn't think we had that many books when I was growing up. We had some donated books. We had some fairy tales. I saw a photo in which I was about three years old and very clearly I am unwrapping a package that contains a book.

[00:25:06] So there you go how do you think memoir writing and an archival research like this will change now that everyone is carrying a phone around in their pocket all the time and using it with abandon and the idea that photographs are meant to last. Has gone away.

[00:25:25] This is the bane of archival libraries I think because you know they they want this stuff. You can touch the stuff that Tim O'Brien's that has the snot on it you know and. And all of this. You know the e-mails you're not having these personal letters written you know with the scrolls and this and the spattered ink and the tears on the page. It's going to be digital and they are not interested in the digital forms for their. And I know this because I've been approached by archives for this and it the idea that somebody's been reading your letters and going over your very private documents later in life really gave me the creeps. I mean the idea your dad and you can't say anything and somebody is looking at obviously this letter means you can't go back. No it doesn't. You know. So my decision after being asked to donate my papers I guess they look at you and you got some actuarial life left but you know the thing in the span is shortening so they try to get to you. And I just thought now this is too creepy.

[00:26:36] I'm going to burn my stuff. Yeah. I do. I don't know whether this follows with your question but I have. A really strange thing that happened where I was both

[00:26:52] The child and the adult looking at this. I started thinking about this test that I took when I was six years old and took twice a year until the end of the fifth grade. My parents told me this was a test that showed I would be smart enough to be a doctor. And since it was going to be a doctor I should be a neurosurgeon. In addition to being a concert pianist. So there were all these expectations put on me at a very early age. So I grew up. With. A standard of failure you know because I was not good at piano and I was not smart enough I didn't think I didn't want to be a doctor. But. That. Followed me the rest of my life if I got a bad review a singing Oh yeah. You were supposed to be a doctor. You weren't smart enough you know any failure that I had it went back to that grade in that that test in the first grade. Well one day you know around the time I was writing this book I said What was that test about. This is a test that govern my self esteem up until my current age. And I thought well no professional would have given a test and told parents that this is what your child is going to do. You know this. So I took a chance and I typed in certain words you can do this now you know I realized I typed in on the internet I put down first grade 1958 Oakland IQ test longitudinal and longitudinal because this I took ten of these tests and the first thing that popped up.

[00:28:43] Was reference to a book by a woman named Delores Turk. It was called children who learned to read early. This was a test about forty nine children out of five thousand in the Oakland School District that year who had learned to read before the first grade. That's all the test was about and they wanted because. And you think only forty nine kids out of five thousand could read when they entered the first grade. You know I mean 2 year olds today are sending text messages. In those days. People said it was dangerous that you should not teach your child and it would ruin them. They'd be you know damaged and emotionally disturbed and you know have learning disabilities and what their bed the rest of their life was. And it's amazing how many parents listen. But forty nine of them. Were criminals and somehow their children learn to read. So I was one of those kids and I thought. This was about the fact that I could read in this book. There were five interviews out of forty nine and I quickly scan through there and my name was there but I realized no the woman would have missed the name because there was a there was a child the Chinese Oriental child it it said and the mother says I learned that you cannot make children appreciate music.

[00:30:15] And I thought oh that's my mother.

[00:30:21] And I started reading and I read all these things it just crushed me. That's when I found out it wasn't my father's favorite. My older brother was because all he could do was talk about my older brother you know me.

[00:30:35] It was like oh well forget about her but my son he's brilliant you know. And we didn't teach him to read early. And as for her we don't know how she read. Maybe her other her older brother taught her. Who knows. Yeah so but from that one interview going it was like stepping into the living room of the past and me being this little girl. Now I'm watching it. I'm 60 something years old and they mean the living room and I waiting for you know seeing everything that's being said oh he's precocious you know. He did this and he did that. And I'm waiting for him to say something about me. And finally he does. And he said oh she's always been a scribbler. Even before the age of four. She

liked to draw pictures and make up stories about them. She has an amazing imagination. And that was enough to make me cry.

[00:31:32] Yeah of course it wasn't.

[00:31:34] You know it was it at that age these two things drawing pictures and making up stories. They're inseparable it's not that I. Drew a picture and made up a story made a story I drew a picture. I think they just happen at the same time at that age.

[00:31:49] So I'm still drawing pictures. Let's talk about your parents since you bring them up. Let's talk about Ed because you talk about them so much and you talk about them so much in the book and you and as you said beginning you.

[00:32:04] You do in your fiction write a lot about about parents and about mothers.

[00:32:08] How is it how is it different writing writing about your parents as characters rather than writing about fictional parents.

[00:32:18] You mean writing about them as they really were and not as characters. I didn't think of them as characters they thought of them as you know who they were. And I was afraid that I would present too many things that would cast them in a particular light that was not true you know because you have to have many perspectives of people. And it's the same with characters in a novel. You cannot have these characters be one dimensional or perfect or completely completely flawed or UN flawed. I was afraid that I would be talking about moments in particular about my mother my mother's life and mine together that would cast her as a terrible person. And I was told by people no she comes across very sympathetically and that people love her in this book. Well this is of course this is my editor. Oh I love this. You know he'll say anything to get a book published.

[00:33:19] Yes. But

[00:33:22] You know there's she's a lot darker if you were just look at this and say Oh the mother is the basis for the mothers in the novels. Well you didn't have a mother in the novel who tried to kill her daughter with a cleaver for example or the mothers in the novels never routinely threatened suicide and occasionally try and front the children. My father doesn't appear in as a character in novels that much except as somebody who dies early which is what my father did. He died when I was 15 as did my older brother. The same year. But I felt I could never write about my father because my memory of him was that of a perfect person an on flawed kind generous person who never told a lie. And I started going through these documents and it was like No he lied. No he was not very sincere. No I mean the other parts of it he was all those things I believe. But he was real. He was human. He had these parts of him that were they weren't perfect and some you know seeing seeing how he would say things that were sort of obsequious for example. And then I had to see him in terms of. How he would be today as a person I wrote about my father for the first time and it's the last thing I wrote for

this book I wrote it the day that the week two weeks after the election I was supposed to turn it in the week after the election.

[00:35:11] I was unable to write and the only thing I could think of when I started to write this chapter was how would my father have voted. And it forced me to examine every thing I knew about him searching for a clue to this question. And I and I went through these moments in childhood and it was very strange how it happened as I recall these moments just off the top of my head and they had a lot to do with falling going down a slide or you know being up in a tree or. And he was supposed to save me. He gave me courage. He had me do things I wouldn't have done otherwise I fell. And then he picked me up and comforted me. So that was a lot of it. And it was so surprising to me that this pattern came up over and over again. And then there's the answer. Um how he would have voted. It took me a long time to get to that point yeah.

[00:36:10] And it's a really it's a hard week to end a book. I think that week after the election it's just a tough tough time to come to the end of something of something. Yeah.

[00:36:21] Yeah. It is not the last chapter in this book. By the way the order these pieces did not follow the order in which I wrote them. But it. I couldn't write. I thought I'm never gonna be able to write anymore for. You know I was so disturbed.

[00:36:40] I.

[00:36:41] And then I I started thinking. But it was not just about my father but everything about our country and how my father would fit into that had. Had he lived you know he was a Baptist minister. He was an evangelical. But at the same time I had to remember he would have been aware then that Martin Luther King had been assassinated and he was a Baptist minister and he led the civil rights march. My father never saw that or never knew about that. So I thought if he had gone through these experiences as we had you know that also would have affected his opinion so.

[00:37:22] Ok. So because dash tells me we have five minutes. I want to think about that going forward looking that that you're talking about that the the political part the forward looking part the imagining into the future part one of the things you say here is wait. I wrote it down because it was so good. Imagine more obey less.

[00:37:42] You said I'm having T-shirts made because that's so smart and so well done.

[00:37:48] I think it's resist more obey less. I just I just I love it. I just. Walt Whitman. Had. Had that. He he owned that before. But I also read blows it up resist much of you know obey obey little resist much you know towards the end you talk about

[00:38:11] That people aren't buying books anymore. Present company excepted and that we are therefore starving our brains and and this made me think of your mother and and this idea that storytelling changes the world. Do you have thoughts about how how we can feed our brains how we

can make people feed their brains how they refuse to buy eat their feet their brains you know you never you can't force people to read you just have to write the best story they want to read you have to look at how people read which is on their phones these days frankly there's

[00:38:48] You know I I actually think that what's going to happen next. Not e-books because those that are actually declining in sales but this new platform they call it. Where you read a 1000 word stories on your phone and if they're really good you you just keep reading and you get to a point where if you want to read the next one you have to pay for it. So that's how people I think writers are going to make their money is they're going to have to write really you know it's kind of time tested in the present time. And then I don't know I think you just have to write stories and I that the need for reading for poetry fiction novels nonfiction is there. We write it maybe they'll come

[00:39:44] Now we want to hear from you guys Mika and I are going to be walking the crowd gathering your questions while Lori asks one more really insightful question to vamp me I am going to you're going to maybe ask one more question while we grab everybody's questions from the audience and then I'll get them to you my guest Oh yes awesome I love that idea OK here's my last Super insightful question and not that that was not a lot of pressure.

[00:40:12] One of the things that you say and I just thought Wow that's true is that each novel is harder to write every time each novel is harder to write. It's one of these things that you think oh I I learned that last time but no no. It actually gets harder each time. I wonder if having written a memoir is going to make novel writing easier going forward next time.

[00:40:31] I think it's going to be at times easier and it's going to be more difficult because of so much of what I learned about writing and memory and how fictional narrative actually brings out these emotional cause I and a lot of this began with you know the writing mind what what I mean by creativity imagination metaphor and all of that kind of stuff. So I will know how that applies to those fictional elements at the same time I'm going to probably be more self-conscious. I go through this with every single book I get to a point where I know this is not going to work. And at times it it hasn't. And I've thrown away. Well I did literally threw it away. I put it in a box and that was among the things that were that I found in these boxes. Every single time I had this feeling and I'm seized with existential dread. And I think that I've I've lost my mind and I have some kind of brain disease. And then I just keep writing. By the way I just want to mention there is there are two chapters in there that are pieces of fiction and they are outtakes from abandoned novels. And unfortunately we in the rush of writing this I wrote that in the preface. But apparently people don't read prefaces including interviewers you know who asked me questions about the time that I was in an auto accident because a fox crossed the road and it was too bad I couldn't teach linguistics anymore. UC Berkeley so these two pieces it's the beginning of the breaker of columns a prologue to an abandoned novel and then language a love story about dead languages. That was also prologue to an abandoned novel.

[00:42:32] I could tell.

[00:42:33] Well my husband didn't know I'm just joking.

[00:42:37] My husband is here. We've been together for 47 years. And he thought that I I've lied about the memoir that I said I said.

[00:42:47] He said I don't remember the fox. I mean we'd been in auto accidents. But I don't remember the fox and say Oh my God. I mean he thinks I would have made up my memoir you know dramatized an auto accident.

[00:43:03] Yeah. So there you go.

[00:43:06] Okay. I have lots of good questions here. I'm going to do everything I can to read them well. OK. So. As an Asian-American first generation I often lament what I perceived to be a distinctly Asian-American culture like say African-American culture I perceive only the intersection of Asian and American culture is there in your opinion. Oh sorry sorry. Is there in your opinion a distinctly Asian-American culture. Will we develop one doesn't matter if we don't. There is no single Asian-American culture and I think that. Misunderstanding and a general audience is the reason why. You know we end up having these gross generalizations of people whether it's any ethnic community Asian-American African-American

[00:43:54] In the Asian-American community you have first born. I mean you have first generation second generation ones who you know traditional ones who you know are completely. And type parent Chinese parent in their culture and they're in their rebellion. I mean it is so different. You said people say would say to me you know my mother doesn't speak broken English how can you write about mothers who speak broken English and I and I or concubines that. That's we've never had concubines and I said you know my mother spoke broken English my grandmother was concubine she killed herself I said that there needs to be a lot more out there so people get over this notion that there's only one culture and there's only one culture that can be written about yeah

[00:44:48] Yeah.

[00:44:51] I was going to ask if that answered the question but I don't know who asked that question.

[00:44:55] I'm struggling with forgiving my Chinese mother for my own childhood. It seems you forgiving yours.

[00:45:01] How did that forgiveness come about. QUESTION It's hard core.

[00:45:06] You know what's funny when writing this and I was remembering all the pains of my childhood. Somebody asked me that this thing about forgiveness and I will say that I thought a lot about this the notion of forgiveness over the last few years I am not the kind generous open hearted person you may think I am based on reading my books. I have a very strong streak of not forgiving

people if they have betrayed me in some way or been what I think are cruel and irredeemable human beings.

[00:45:40] So but it never occurred to me that my mother was that person my mother was disturbed. And she she gave me a lot of who I am today not that I am exactly like her but the kinds of questions that I think about it in the same way my father has my mother for one thing taught me to detect discern truth in people's genuine ness and people and falsity. It's a very very important ability to have when you're a a a writer fiction writer. So in so many ways she was wonderful.

[00:46:25] So it never occurred to me I had to forgive her. She said something at the end of her life anyway when she was had Alzheimer's. She came to the surface one day and she was seemingly clear and she said I just want to tell you I'm sorry I hurt you when you were little. And I said No no you didn't. Doesn't matter and she said no no. I know I did. I just can't remember what I did. I just want you to forget. Like I've forgotten. I'm sorry. If I had not forgiven her up to that point I would have forgiven everything. I think what every child wants to hear from the parent is all those times I hurt you.

[00:47:13] I'm sorry.

[00:47:21] Have you ever imagined yourself being born in China to the same parents. What life would be like would you be writing.

[00:47:28] What would you be writing about I sort of have the answer to that because I have three half sisters. My mother's first her daughters from her first marriage and they were left behind in China. They went through the Cultural Revolution. They were sent to the countryside and had to work in the rice fields as farmers. They were denied education in some cases assigned to their jobs assigned to. In one case to the man they would marry. One of them said to me that she always wanted to do something creative but she felt that now her mind was rusted and she would never be able to do that. I don't know whether that's true but I definitely would not have ever tried to write anything and publish it. China has gone through periods in the past where you couldn't write things the kind of things that are being written today. There's a lot of literature that's it's very different but who knows. You know it goes back to this this question of nature and nurture and what things can you not suppress in an individual kind of thing.

[00:48:38] All right. So this is a question about the title why where the past begins. What does it mean.

[00:48:44] Yeah after reading about lead indeed the title of the much better title was the one I gave this in the beginning.

[00:48:52] It was called the writer's mind or know a writer's mind. What do you think. Catchy.

[00:49:00] Somehow my editor was not really enthusiastic and he said okay. We'll use that as a place holder.

[00:49:06] And then one day after I had written about seven or eight of these things he sent me this title page and it said where the past begins by Amy Tan and I thought well that's audacious you know because I'm the kind of writer you you can say my writing is bad but just don't change it yourself just tell me it's bad. I will. I will fix it the best I can. But hearing where the past begins. He said What do you think. They said Well yeah it's nice I guess. And he and I and I said Well why did you choose that. And he said well you wrote it. I said I did. They said Yeah. The last thing you sent me was the last line. Is great. Great

[00:49:55] Great title. You know. I think so much of this was written in this fugue state that I don't remember things that I've written and this has been true with every novel. I don't remember lines I included a lot of journal or a little I call them quirks excerpts from my journals. These are a lot of the things I don't remember thinking but I put them down and obviously I did I write these things off the top of my head and then they're gone but they're still they're still there they're still there and that's why you need an editor to say oh I'm a genius.

[00:50:31] Yeah I know it's really I mean it's a full credit.

[00:50:36] All right. Someone wants to know about your thoughts about written storytelling versus oral storytelling written storytelling oral storytelling.

[00:50:45] I. I prefer the written form because you get to revise it. Oral storytelling is very difficult because of the very nature of an audience and the time limits. You need to have and I know this from having given talks you need to have a very strong beginning. You have to have a developmental narrative an arc and you have to have a very strong ending. And during that time you have to think of all the ways this is going to wind in and out until you get to this was you know this wonderful conclusion to this story. It takes a lot of work to do the oral storytelling because at the same time you have the complication of a cell phone going off or the person in the front row falling asleep. And these are all things that enter into the oral storytelling tradition. So I much prefer written stories for me I much prefer that. And I like listening to oral storytelling is when it's done really well agreed.

[00:51:54] All right. So somebody has a question about Kitchen God's Wife. Why. The main character had M.S. why the main character had a what

[00:52:03] Had M.S. had M.S..

[00:52:09] What was the nature of that. You know these all had reasons at the time that the daughter the daughter has a secret and. And she it's it's a life changing secret and she can't tell her mother. And at the end it is revealed and it's reflected through. That. That that secret that she has and her mother has a big secret as well. It probably was because I mean there's obvious metaphoric reasons why I did that but probably because there was a friend at the time who had that and I was seeing what kind of ambiguity and the beauty she saw in her life now and certainties quite by coincidence. I broke my leg skiing that year and I would I had to go out for a while on crutches and people read the

book and they M.S.. Oh. Yeah. That they thought that it was real. Yeah it in it precluded there are a number of things in this book that in these other books that were almost prescient of what was going to happen to me later. The fictional Peace Love Language A Love Story. This woman becomes brain damaged and has a hard time holding contiguous thoughts and I became brain damaged by Lyme disease and the same thing happened to me so I thought wow this is this was it was as though you know that's its twilight zone and you've made up something and it actually becomes your life. I

[00:53:50] Don't have M.S. so good. Good work.

[00:53:54] All right. That's a good question. Writing a novel can take a lot of time and energy and blood and soul. What do you do after you write a novel to rejuvenate yourself and how to get yourself ready to write the next book.

[00:54:07] Well what I've been doing lately. Part of it. Part of it has to do with post-election my determination to find beauty in the world. And so I started taking in nature journaling class and that meant going out in nature quite a bit but I'm sketching. Drawing was something I started doing when I was a child and I wanted to be an artist secretly. I gave up the notion when my high school teacher wrote in my report card that I had admirable skills but that I lacked amazing imagination which is important to a deeper creative level. I showed him yeah

[00:54:48] So I've been drawing.

[00:54:49] If you if you're on Facebook you would have seen a lot of my drawings that usually of birds or animals squirrels cats whatever. And it's the one thing what I loved doing about it is that I know it's not gonna be my profession. No one expects it to be perfect and I suffer from this problem with. Not wanting to show things until it's perfect and I was just beaten it to death. I just put it out there even if it's bad. Like the bird I just put out the spinal column doesn't exactly follow where the tail comes out. I saw it later but I don't care. You know it's it's just there. It was more important to document to me that this was the first winter migrating bird that came into my yard. It was a dark eyed Junco and it was feeding ground feeder hopping around so that to me was the most important part of that. And I happened to draw a picture of it. I also do things that have to do with nature like swim with sharks. I actually love swimming with sharks.

[00:56:00] Just anything really basically anything to do with nature also hardcore what struggles have you had as a writer of color what struggles struggles you know in the beginning.

[00:56:19] I had a fear that I was putting down things incorrectly and that I would have people from China say you got it wrong how dare you. You know 1 billion Chinese people are angry at you

[00:56:34] Because my mother used to tell me I knew nothing about being Chinese and but I was really I was always you know beaming inside whenever somebody from China said Yeah that's how it was you know you described our town and the flood and how my parents were.

[00:56:52] You know what. I really was writing about emotions that everybody has in a family. The other struggle is when people said as I mentioned before why do you write about mothers with broken English. Why don't you write positive male role models. Why didn't you. You know it's all these list of things of societal wrongs people perceive that they think that one work of fiction or one fiction writer should address. So that was difficult but there's so many more fiction writers out there now who are Asian-American. They can you know carry that load. I don't have to do that anymore. What I get now on Facebook you know I write a lot of political opinion and I've had people who say things like I don't have to. I don't come to this page to hear what you think. Go back and do what you are supposed to do. Which is think

[00:57:53] Ok.

[00:57:55] So I just you know a lot of my stuff has to do with immigration. And apparently I shouldn't have an opinion on that even though my parents immigrated and they were illegal for a while.

[00:58:10] Please keep writing about politics. All right. Says one more question.

[00:58:14] So we're going to listen.

[00:58:18] There was one more question. Don't clap yet. So I thought we end with the craft question.

[00:58:23] This is someone who says As a budding writer I find myself struggling to develop a regular writing routine. Would you please share what writing rituals or writing routines you practice in order to maintain and develop your craft. Don't follow my

[00:58:38] Regimen. I used to be very disciplined I would get up but. You know sit down at eight o'clock nine o'clock and then I would finish at seven when my husband came home from work.

[00:58:51] Unfortunately my husband retired. So. The very last page of this book will give you an idea of what my writing day is like and a lot of it is getting distracted and doing everything but the writing at the same time everything is absorbing what's going to go into the writing. That's the excuse. Thinking about the writing. You can only do that so so much. Now the discipline of this book is the one that I would recommend you do if you can bear it. And that is that every single day or know every single week. You have to turn in 15 to 30 new pages and they should be an arc. It can't be just random stuff. They have to as though this is a a the form of an essay or the form of a chapter or a story. That is the goal that you have. And it's amazing what you can do when you're forced to do that would you come up with through sheer terror.

[01:00:04] Yes okay. There you have it. Sheer terror. That's the that's the watchword.

[01:00:08] Applause Thank you so much.

[01:00:11] Applause Thank you Amy and Laurie. Wait wait before you stand up. Let's give these ladies a round of applause. Like a real round of applause. Applause. Thank you so much. And thank you all for coming tonight.

[01:00:35] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.