

16 **Extraordinary** Asian Americans

Second Edition

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To the Teacher

According to *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, a report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York (2004, second edition), “High-interest, low-difficulty texts play a significant role in an adolescent literacy program and are critical for fostering the reading skills of struggling readers and the engagement of all students. In addition to using appropriate grade-level textbooks that may already be available in the classroom, it is crucial to have a range of texts in the classroom that link to multiple ability levels and connect to students’ background experiences.”

Biographies about extraordinary people are examples of one such kind of text. The 16 Americans described in this collection should both inspire and reassure students. As students read, your instruction can include approaches that will support not only comprehension, but also learning from passages.

Reading and language arts skills not only enrich students’ academic lives but also their personal lives. The *Extraordinary Americans* series was written to help students gain confidence as readers. The biographies were written to pique students’ interest while engaging their understanding of vocabulary, recalling facts, identifying the main idea, drawing conclusions, and applying knowledge. The added value of reading these biographies is that students will learn about other people and, perhaps, about themselves.

Students will read stories demonstrating that great things are accomplished by everyday people who may have grown up just like them—or maybe even with greater obstacles to overcome. Students will discover that being open to new ideas, working hard, and believing in one’s self make them extraordinary people, too!

Structure of the Book

The Biographies

The collection of stories can be used in many different ways. You may assign passages for independent reading or engage students in choral reading. No matter which strategies you use, each passage contains pages to guide your instruction.

At the end of each passage, you will find a series of questions. The questions are categorized, and you can assign as many as you wish. The purposes of the questions vary:

- **Remembering the Facts:** Questions in this section engage students in a direct comprehension strategy, and require them to recall and find information while keeping track of their own understanding.
- **Understanding the Story:** Questions posed in this section require a higher level of thinking. Students are asked to draw conclusions and make inferences.
- **Getting the Main Idea:** Once again, students are able to stretch their thinking. Questions in this section are fodder for dialog and discussion around the extraordinary individuals and an important point in their lives.
- **Applying What You've Learned:** Proficient readers internalize and use the knowledge that they gain after reading. The question or activity posed allows for students to connect what they have read to their own lives.

In the latter part of the book, there are additional resources to support your instruction.

Vocabulary

A list of key words is included for each biography. The lists can be used in many ways. Assign words for students to define, use them for spelling lessons, and so forth.

Answer Key

An answer key is provided. Responses will likely vary for Getting the Main Idea and Applying What You've Learned questions.

Additional Activities

Extend and enhance students' learning! These suggestions include conducting research, creating visual art, exploring cross-curricular activities, and more.

References

Learn more about each extraordinary person or assign students to discover more on their own. Start with the sources provided.

To the Student

The lives of many Asian Americans have made a difference in the story of America. Writers, artists, scientists, teachers, politicians, ministers, lawyers, doctors, businesspeople, athletes, and so many more have helped to make America what it is today. Asian Americans can be proud of their heritage. It is a pride all Americans can share.

In this book, you will read the stories of 16 of these people:

- Daniel K. Inouye, United States Senator from Hawaii and the first Japanese American to be elected to Congress
- Maxine Hong Kingston, an author whose books tell of Chinese-American contributions to American society
- I.M. Pei, one of the world's leading architects
- Maya Lin, a sculptor who is best known for designing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC
- An Wang, scientist, inventor, and founder of Wang Laboratories
- Seiji Ozawa, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra for over 20 years
- Kristi Yamaguchi, winner of a gold medal in women's figure skating in the 1992 Olympic Games
- Yo-Yo Ma, the finest cellist in the world today
- David Ho, physician and medical researcher who has made important discoveries in the fight against AIDS
- Wendy Lee Gramm, an economist who was chair of the Commodities Futures Trading Commission
- Ellison Onizuka, an astronaut who lost his life in the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle in 1986

- Carlos Bulosan, a poet and writer whose book, *America Is in the Heart* became a classic in Asian-American literature
- Jose Aruego, an illustrator of children's books
- Elaine Chao, Secretary of Labor
- Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club*
- Vera Wang, a fashion designer

The motto on the Great Seal of the United States reads *E PLURIBUS UNUM*. That is Latin for “Out of many, one.” The United States is made up of many peoples who have come together to form one nation. Each group has been an important part of American history. I hope you will enjoy reading about 16 Asian Americans who have made a difference.

—Nancy Lobb

Amy Tan

Author

Critics agree that there are two works in Chinese-American literature are the most important. The first is Maxine Hong Kingston's, *The Woman Warrior*. The second is Amy Tan's, *The Joy Luck Club*. *The Joy Luck Club* is a best-selling book. It also became a blockbuster movie.

Amy Tan's parents, were both Chinese immigrants. Her father, John, was a Baptist minister and an electrical engineer. He left China in 1949. He wanted to get away from the civil war.

Amy's mother, Daisy, was a nurse. She had divorced her first husband in China. When she did, she lost custody of her three daughters. In 1949, the Communist takeover began. Daisy was able to escape the country on the last boat out of Shanghai. Her three daughters remained behind with their father.

John and Daisy met in the United States. The couple had three children: two boys and a girl. Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California, on February 19, 1952.

When Amy was eight years old, she entered a writing contest. Her essay was called "What the Library Means to Me." She won first place. Her prize was a transistor radio. Her essay was also published in the local newspaper. Young Amy was a published author!

In 1967, when Amy was 15, her older brother died from a brain tumor. The very next year, her father also died of a brain tumor. This loss, combined with the earlier loss of her daughters in China, devastated Daisy.



Daisy left California with Amy and her younger brother. The family finally settled in Switzerland. Because of these experiences, grief later became a major theme in Amy Tan's novels.

Amy graduated from high school in 1969. Then she returned to the United States. Over the next five years, she attended five different colleges. At Linfield College in Oregon, she met her future husband, Lou DeMattei. She went with him to San Jose. In 1972, she graduated from San Jose State University. She got a degree in English and one in linguistics.

In 1973, she earned a master's degree in linguistics from San Jose State. Then she won a fellowship that allowed her to enroll in a Ph.D. program in linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1974, Amy and Lou were married.

In 1976, a close friend was murdered. Amy was so upset that she dropped out of the Ph.D. program. For the next five years, she worked in programs that served disabled children. She was a language development specialist.

Next, Amy worked as a business writer. She worked for companies such as AT&T and IBM. She wrote various types of technical materials for these companies. She also wrote speeches for salesmen.

In 1985, Amy realized that she was becoming a workaholic. This means that she worked all the time and didn't take time for fun. She wanted to find a hobby to help her relax. So she joined the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. This small group of writers began meeting in Amy's home. They read and discussed each other's work.

In 1986, Amy's first short story "End Game" was published. A literary agent saw the story. She encouraged Amy to keep writing. Amy completed three more stories. The agent submitted these to the publisher G.P. Putnam's Sons. Amy was to write more short stories that would then be combined to make a book of short stories.

In the meantime, Amy took her mother on a trip to China. Daisy wanted to see the daughters she had left behind nearly 40 years earlier. Amy had a chance to meet her half-sisters. She also learned a lot about her mother. The insights she found on this trip inspired her to finish writing the stories for her book.

Amy wrote a total of sixteen short stories. The stories were linked and shared the same characters. In 1989, they were published as *The Joy Luck Club*. The book became a surprise best-seller. It was on the *New York Times* best seller list for 40 weeks.

Critics raved about Amy Tan's new "novel." From then on, no one thought of it as a collection of short stories. The book was nominated for a National Book Award. It received a number of other awards. In 1994, it was made into a movie. The movie had a cast that was both Asian and Asian American.

The Joy Luck Club was a group of Chinese women in San Francisco in 1949. They meet to tell stories and play mahjong (a game using small tiles like dominoes). The club has continued meeting for many years. When one member dies, her daughter is asked to take her place at the mahjong table.

The three remaining members of the club and their daughters all tell their stories. All of the mothers were born in China. They lived lives of hardship, pride, and the fear of bringing shame to their families.

The daughters were all born in America. They tried to balance their mothers' lifestyles with American values. The gap between them seemed huge. But the love between them was greater still. The book was fiction, but Amy wove pieces of her own life story into it.

In 1991, Amy published her second novel. *The Kitchen God's Wife* is the story of a young Chinese-American woman trying to understand her mother's Chinese background. This book also got great reviews. Many critics thought it was even better than *The Joy Luck Club*.

Both books have since been translated into more than 20 languages. They are read in Asian studies courses in high schools and colleges around the country.

Amy Tan has written other books, too. These include *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *The Opposite of Fate*, and *Saving Fish from Drowning*. She has also written two children's books, *The Moon Lady* and *The Chinese Siamese Cat*.

Amy loves downhill skiing and hiking. She also enjoys traveling. Each year, she attends the Westminster Dog Show. She was part owner of the top-ranked Yorkshire Terrier in both 2002 and 2003. Amy lives with her husband in San Francisco and New York. They have two dogs.

Amy works for a number of charities. Recently, she was one of the founders of Lyme4Kids, a part of the Lyme Disease Association. This group provides money to pay for medical tests for children who may have Lyme Disease. Amy herself has suffered from Lyme Disease since 1999.

Amy Tan is a member of a band called The Rock Bottom Remainders. This is a band made up entirely of authors! The group was founded in 1992. Members include many famous authors including Stephen King, Dave Barry, Matt Groening, and Scott Turow. Tickets for their 2006 tour sold for up to \$200! But this money went to a good cause. The purpose of the band is to raise money for America Scores. This is an after-school literacy program for kids. This program combines soccer and learning. Children use the teamwork they learn on the soccer field to work on teams to produce written work in the classroom. The program is fun, and it works!

Amy Tan is an important Chinese-American author. In her works, she has explored what it is like to grow up as a first-generation Asian American. Her books are an important part of American literature today. In addition, Amy Tan is using her fame to help the children of America's future.

Remembering the Facts

1. Why did Daisy Tan lose contact with her first three children?
2. Why did the Tans move to Switzerland?
3. What kind of work did Amy do for five years after she dropped out of her Ph.D. program?
4. What group did Amy join as a hobby?
5. What was Amy Tan's first novel?
6. What are the stories in the book about?
7. Name one of Amy Tan's other novels.
8. What is the purpose of the Rock Bottom Reminders?

Understanding the Story

9. Why do you think grief is an important theme in Amy's works?

10. As a teenager, Amy Tan had many cultural conflicts with her mother. Why do you think this was common for the daughters of Chinese immigrants?

Getting the Main Idea

Why do you think *The Joy Luck Club* is an important part of American literature?

Applying What You've Learned

Write a paragraph or draw a cartoon illustrating a difference between your parents' values and the culture in which you live.