

## **Minutes of the Meeting of The Novel Club Held October 2, 2012**

### **Subject novel: *Saving Fish from Drowning* by Amy Tan**

Mary Douthit and David Novak hosted the first meeting of the Novel Club's 117th season in the spacious first floor reception room of the Waterford Building on Lake Erie in Lakewood. It was a well attended meeting, with 30 of the members enjoying sumptuous fare during convivial pre- and post-meeting conversation periods.

President Leon Gabinet called the meeting to order at 8:15pm. Mrs. Douthit, Treasurer, reported that the club had no outstanding bills to pay, the club's annual program booklet having been printed and mailed earlier this year. Two members had not yet paid their 2012-2013 dues, but after their dues have been collected, the Club's checking account balance is expected to be \$2437.18.

There were no guests to introduce.

Jane Hammond indicated that the program committee has already met to discuss selections for the 2013-2014 season, but she declined to comment as to whether a theme has been chosen, indicating that all will be revealed at the business meeting in April. She did, however, invite members to propose themes as well as titles of specific novels that the program committee might consider for inclusion in the lineup for reading in the Club's 118th season.

Louise Mooney read the minutes of the meeting that was held June 1, 2012, when the novel under discussion was Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America*. Ms. Mooney pointed out that it was the night when the planet Venus crossed in front of the moon, an event which happens only once every 243 years. Louise had acted as secretary *pro tempore* on behalf of our recording secretary, Carol Fox, who was unable to attend the June meeting. Mrs. Fox was unable to attend this meeting as well, due to her husband's illness, but she had followed club protocol and requested that the vice president record the evening's activity in her absence.

Jeff Glazer had prepared a biographical paper about Amy Tan, author of the book read by club members for the evening's meeting. Ms. Tan was born in Santa Clara, California in 1952 to immigrant Chinese parents. Her father and older brother died when she was a teenager, and she moved with her mother and other brother to Europe for a few years. Returning to California, she attended a Baptist college for a time before she followed her then-boyfriend (now husband) to San Jose State College. She abandoned the pre-med major that her parents had selected for her and switched her course of study to English and linguistics. Later she continued her study of linguistics in doctoral programs at the University of California Santa Cruz and Berkeley.

Her father was an electrical engineer and a Baptist minister who had escaped civil war in China by leaving in 1947. Her mother left Shanghai in 1949, leaving behind the three daughters she had borne her ex-husband.

Amy has said that she was very unhappy about her appearance and her Chinese heritage since she was the only Asian in her classes from third grade through high school. As a teenager, she attempted to reject everything Chinese and to assimilate completely as an American. In 1967, her father died of brain tumor, and in 1968, her older brother suffered the same fate. Her mother moved the family to the Netherlands, then to Germany, and finally to Switzerland. An understandably rebellious teenager, Amy took up with an older man until her mother had him arrested for giving her then 16-year-old daughter hashish.

Her debut as a writer came with the publication of a short story called "Endgame," which was sufficiently well received that she became a member of the Squaw Valley writers group and a full-time freelance writer. In 1989, she received a \$50,000 advance for her first major novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, which spent eight months on the New York Times bestseller list. The paperback rights were sold for over \$1.2 million. Her subsequent books, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) were also very successful.

Interesting tidbits: The pool playing Ms. Tan studied classical piano for 15 years, developed seizures from Lyme disease and believes in ghosts.

Norman Glazer provided the club members with a critical analysis of *Saving Fish from Drowning*. In her estimation, the book was a failure because Ms. Tan's stated purpose in writing the book was to enlighten the world about the dreadful repression foisted upon the citizens of Burma following a military coup in 1962. Instead, the book is, in Mrs. Glazer's estimation, "drowning in farce" and contains far too much slapstick, winding up as a cross between *Canterbury Tales* and "Gilligan's Island." The only fully developed character in the novel is Bibi Chen, the all-knowing but dead narrator. Bibi is, we are told, the voice of Amy Tan's mother, although this book departs from Tan's standard pattern of exploring the Asian / American differences brought to light in mother-daughter relationships. And Bibi is not the only fantasy character; another, a 15 year old boy, is thought by the Karen natives of Burma to be a returning deity, and then there are Nats -- humans who died violently and come back to cause trouble for the living.

In the novel, a group of tourists who anticipated being guided through China and Myanmar by the art historian Bibi Chen are instead led by one of their number who has no experience in organizing travel itineraries. Chaos ensues and all but one of the tourists are hijacked to a remote, nearly inaccessible highlands camp by rebels against the military regime that controls Myanmar. They have been kidnapped because the Burmese rebels believe that one of the tourists is -- like a British scam artist from the

19th century -- descended from the gods and has come to save them from their miserable exile.

The tourists' position, however, seems more comical than dire, Mrs. Glazer believes. Ms. Tan seems to be satirizing reality shows rather than delivering a strong political statement. In addition, Mrs. Glazer wrote, "humor is not her forte. Instead, we are given clumsy irony and inept, draggy slapstick." The book revolves more around the lives of the flat characters rather than the art, artifacts and sites that they have traveled to see. Some of the situations are clever and funny, but the reader grows weary of the repetition of themes and shallowness of the characters.

The question-and-answer period proved quite lively. Whitney Lloyd responded first to Question #1, "Why does Tan lead us to assume for most of the novel that Bibi was murdered?" by suggesting that setting a story of violence in a country that is ruled by a totalitarian regime is a good twist on the murder mystery genre. Leigh Fabens commented that Tan had taken a delightful new twist on the unreliable narrator, providing readers with a narrator who critiques her own funeral and thus is set up, due to confusion as to her status from the very outset, as someone who could be completely unreliable. Louise Mooney opined that it was simply an unsuccessful trick -- oddly counterintuitive -- that the actor would have died at the hands of her own beloved mother.

The crowd gave a solidly affirmative, "Yes, very believable," in response to Question #2, "Is it believable that so many educated people could be so culturally unaware?" "The book is unquestionably a send-up of the tourist industry, where experience itself is artificially made to be exotic, but in fact, it is very scripted," offered Ted Sande. The book turns on the fact that the characters wind up in a situation beyond the control of the tourist industry. Many club members who had traveled extensively felt that American tourists are particularly culturally unaware, but Leon Gabinet suggested that Americans are not the only insular travelers, and that Asians and Europeans can also lack understanding of the other cultures. Several members opined that Europeans (due to geography and out of necessity) are more aware of cultural differences, and that their news media are less nationalistic and more globally focused.

Larry Siegler tried to bring the group back to focusing on a discussion of the book, noting that it is a satire that shows up very well the typical foolish American. He felt the weakness of the book was its spinning out at the end on pop psychology. But the crowd was not to be swayed and returned to its criticism of tourists in general and the tourist industry's intention to keep travelers from learning about average people in the lands where they travel, instead funneling all tourists to activities that separate them from their money.

Question #3 led to a discussion of the characters' motivation in traveling to China and Burma, areas about which they were clearly very naïve. Were they trying to do good? To save their tribal captors while extricating themselves from exile? Did they want to reform the oppressive government? Or were they just out to have a nice vacation? Most felt the book did not examine the cross-cultural themes as much as it did the differences between the American men and women; Leigh Fabens felt Amy Tan capably described the total lack of understanding between the American characters and Nick Ogan thought the author's presentation of the lack of interpersonal understanding was wonderfully comical. Art Stupay felt the author did provide interesting cultural commentary by making a caricature of Americans' sympathy and generosity as well as their ignorance, and George Weimer observed that Winston Churchill had described Americans as "talkative and generous." The group's tendency to bring politics into the discussion bubbled up once again, pointing out that two themes in the book -- that good intentions do not work out too well and that naïveté gets people in trouble -- were currently very much in the news in conjunction with the recent assassination of the ambassador to Libya.

In an attempt to segue out of a discussion of politics, the group moved on to Question #4, "Do you feel that Tan accurately portrays the way media shape outcomes and people's sympathies?" In the novel, it is the TV host of an animal show who leads the effort to find the missing American tourists. Bob Targett, who has been professionally involved with media for decades, said that the book's description of the success of the exertion pressure on the government by the characters is very believable, noting that even malevolent governments do not like ugly incidents. Bob pointed out that all countries are very sensitive to the way they are perceived worldwide, and Leon Gabinet reminded us that China and Russia had spent enormous amounts of money on public relations. There ensued a discussion ranging from the purpose and influence of Voice of America to Al Jazeera, with a general consensus of disgust for the fact that media tend to focus on unimportant issues rather than ones deemed important by the group's members. Whitney Lloyd observed that it is not just in America where good coverage is weak. But George Weimer reminded us that it has always been the case, stating "Did not Juvenal write that it is always than ever about 'bread and circuses.'" Sports is the top news story in every country. The proliferation of new news outlets due to progress in technology may not alter that much at all.

Question #6 was about the perception of Americans overseas. Succinctly, Bob Targett said foreigners think Americans all desire to be rich. David Novak cited the fact that Afghan soldiers were given articles explaining to them that some habits that they found very offensive were innocuous. Ham Emmons said that we are defined by our culture, not by our language. Art Stupay opined that most foreigners may fear our military, but really they are concerned about their own lives and are not thinking about Americans at all. Jeff Glazer offered that different cultures definitely do rank personal rights differently, noting that in America, free speech is considered very important while in China the emphasis falls on rights to food and shelter not to free speech or voting.

According to Ted Sande, Americans are perceived as being more concerned with their rights than with their obligations; in other words, Americans are seen as very selfish. Americans' upward mobility was compared to that of other countries, both favorably and unfavorably.

And with that, the discussion ended and the meeting adjourned to pleasant socializing and enjoyment of the remaining food and wine.

Respectfully submitted,

Anne P. Ogan, Vice President  
Secretary *pro tempore*