



The Bonesetter's Daughter

By Amy Tan

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In memories that rise like wisps of ghosts, LuLing Young searches for the name of her mother, the daughter of the Famous Bonesetter from the Mouth of the Mountain. Trying to hold on to the evaporating past, she begins to write all that she can remember of her life as a girl in China. Meanwhile, her daughter Ruth, a ghostwriter for authors of self-help books, is losing the ability to speak up for herself in front of the man she lives with and his two teenage daughters. None of her professional sound bites and pat homilies works for her personal life; she knows only how to translate what others want to say.

Ruth starts suspecting that something is terribly wrong with her mother. As a child, Ruth had been constantly subjected to her mother's disturbing notions about curses and ghosts, and to her repeated threats to kill herself, and was even forced by her mother to try to communicate with ghosts. But now LuLing seems less argumentative, even happy, far from her usual disagreeable and dissatisfied self.

While tending to her ailing mother, Ruth discovers the pages LuLing wrote in Chinese, the story of her tumultuous and star-crossed life, and is transported to a backwoods village known as Immortal Heart. There she learns of secrets passed along by a mute nursemaid, Precious Auntie; of a cave where dragon bones are mined, some of which may prove to be the teeth of Peking Man; of the crumbling ravine known as the End of the World, where Precious Auntie's scattered bones lie, and of the curse that LuLing believes she released through betrayal.

Like layers of sediment being removed, each page reveals secrets of a larger mystery: What became of Peking Man? What was the name of the Bonesetter's Daughter? And who was Precious Auntie, whose suicide changed the path of LuLing's life? Within LuLing's calligraphed pages awaits the truth about a mother's heart, what she cannot tell her daughter yet hopes she will never forget.

Set in contemporary San Francisco and in a Chinese village where Peking Man is being unearthed, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is an excavation of the human spirit: the past, its deepest wounds, its most profound hopes. The story conjures the pain of broken dreams, the power of myths, and the strength of love that enables us to recover in memory what we have lost in grief. Over the course of one fog-shrouded year, between one season of falling stars and the next, mother and

daughter find what they share in their bones through heredity, history, and inexpressible qualities of love.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

At the beginning of Amy Tan's fourth novel, two packets of papers written in Chinese calligraphy fall into the hands of Ruth Young. One bundle is titled *Things I Know Are True* and the other, *Things I Must Not Forget*. The author? That would be the protagonist's mother, LuLing, who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. In these documents the elderly matriarch, born in China in 1916, has set down a record of her birth and family history, determined to keep the facts from vanishing as her mind deteriorates.

A San Francisco career woman who makes her living by ghostwriting self-help books, Ruth has little idea of her mother's past or true identity. What's more, their relationship has tended to be an angry one. Still, Ruth recognizes the onset of LuLing's decline--along with her own remorse over past rancor--and hires a translator to decipher the packets. She also resolves to "ask her mother to tell her about her life. For once, she would ask. She would listen. She would sit down and not be in a hurry or have anything else to do."

Framed at either end by Ruth's chapters, the central portion of *The Bonesetter's Daughter* takes place in China in the remote, mountainous region where anthropologists discovered Peking Man in the 1920s. Here superstition and tradition rule over a succession of tiny villages. And here LuLing grows up under the watchful eye of her hideously scarred nursemaid, Precious Auntie. As she makes clear, it's not an enviable setting:

I noticed the ripe stench of a pig pasture, the pockmarked land dug up by dragon-bone dream-seekers, the holes in the walls, the mud by the wells, the dustiness of the unpaved roads. I saw how all the women we passed, young and old, had the same bland face, sleepy eyes that were mirrors of their sleepy minds.

Nor is rural isolation the worst of it. LuLing's family, a clan of ink makers, believes itself cursed by its connection to a local doctor, who cooks up his potions and remedies from human bones. And indeed, a great deal of bad luck befalls the narrator and her sister GaoLing before they can finally engineer their escape from China. Along the way, familial squabbles erupt around every corner, particularly among mothers, daughters, and sisters. And as she did in her earlier *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan uses these conflicts to explore the intricate dynamic that exists between first-generation Americans and their immigrant elders. --Victoria Jenkins

From Publishers Weekly

In its rich character portrayals and sensitivity to the nuances of mother-daughter relationships, Tan's new novel is the real successor to, and equal of, *The Joy Luck Club*. This luminous and gripping book demonstrates enhanced tenderness and wisdom, however; it carries the texture of real life and reflects the paradoxes historical events can produce. Ruth Young is a 40-ish ghostwriter in San Francisco who periodically goes mute, a metaphorical indication of her inability to express her true feelings to the man she lives with, Art Kamen, a divorced father of two teenage daughters. Ruth's inability to talk is subtly echoed in the story of her mother LuLing's early life in China, which forms the long middle section of the novel. Overbearing, accusatory, darkly pessimistic, LuLing has always been a burden to Ruth. Now, at 77, she has Alzheimer's, but luckily she had recorded in a diary the extraordinary events of her childhood and youth in a small village in China during the years that included the discovery nearby of the bones of Peking Man, the Japanese invasion, the birth of the Republic and the rise of Communism. LuLing was raised by a nursemaid called Precious Auntie, the daughter of a famous bonesetter. Once beautiful, Precious Auntie's face was

burned in a suicide attempt, her mouth sealed with scar tissue. When LuLing eventually learns the secrets of Precious Auntie's tragic life, she is engulfed by shame and guilt. These emotions are echoed by Ruth when she reads her own mother's revelations, and she finally understands why LuLing thought herself cursed. Tan conjures both settings with resonant detail, juxtaposing scenes of rural domestic life in a China still ruled by superstition and filial obedience, and of upscale California half a century later. The novel exhibits a poignant clarity as it investigates the dilemma of adult children who must become caretakers of their elderly parents, a situation Tan articulates with integrity and exemplary empathy for both generations. Agent, Sandy Dijkstra. (Feb. 19) Forecast: With a readership already clamoring for the book, and Tan embarking on a 22-city tour, this novel will be a sure hit; its terrific sepia-tinted cover photo of a woman in old China only adds to its allure. Moreover, readers will be intrigued by Tan's hint that this story about family secrets is semi-autobiographical. The dedication reads: "On the last day my mother spent on earth, I learned her real name, as well as that of my grandmother."

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From Library Journal

Best-selling author Tan will not disappoint her readers with her most recent work. As with *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Tan's narration represents the perspectives of both the Chinese-born mother and the American-born daughter. Ruth, a successful freelance ghostwriter, has lived for nine years with her partner and his two daughters. She is the only child of LuLing, who was widowed shortly after Ruth was born. Now in her mid-forties, Ruth begins to examine her feelings toward her mother, her relationship with her partner, and her career. In the midst of her emotional confusion, she rediscovers her mother's handwritten story of her life in China. After arranging for a translation, Ruth learns some long-hidden truths about her family, which help her to appreciate her mother better. Tan explores the conflicts faced by many women who seek independence while caring for partners, children, and family. She writes with compassion about the tension between immigrant parents and American-born children caused by differences in language and cultural upbringing. This is another fine novel by an important American author. Recommended for all libraries.

-DRebecca Stuhr, *Grinnell Coll. Libs., IA*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Michael Milliner:

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