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INTRODUCTION

Rachel Solomon

KUOW Seattle

From 949 KUOW Seattle, I'm Rachel Solomon. This is Speakers Forum.

Amy Tan's mother wanted her to become a doctor and a concert pianist. Instead, Tan chose to write fiction, a career that was out of line with her Chinese immigrant parents' expectations. Tan is the author of numerous best-selling novels, including *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Her children's book, *Sagwa The Chinese Siamese Cat*, was turned into a PBS TV show. She spoke at the University of Washington's Meany Hall on January 12, 2012. Her talk was called "Creative minds do not think alike."

FEATURED SPEAKER

Amy Tan

Author

I'm very happy to be here in Seattle. I love Seattle. I think it's such a beautiful city. And when we're here, I keep thinking, why are we not here more often? We have a lot of friends. So I thank you for inviting me. One thing that Lou and I commented on that we were not so fond of was the fact that when you are at a crosswalk, you cannot cross until the light changes. We have not seen anything like this except when we are in Scandinavia. And I was told that if we did this, we could get a ticket. And I said, well, we would just say we're from New York. And I was told by, that we'd get double the fine with that. So you can't be, you can't be creative with the excuses here.

Creativity, as I said, I don't know where this title came from. And I, one of the things that's difficult for me when, when talking about a subject like creativity is that it is the antithesis of what creativity is. And that is when you talk about, when you say what it is, you are doing the opposite. Creativity is

constructing something from all kinds of disparate places. Whereas if you talk about what it is, you're explaining it and you're deconstructing it. I was talking to a friend of mine who's a neuroscientist, David Eagleman, and he was saying one of the things you can do to really throw off your opponent, say you're playing tennis, and you, you, you know, you're kind of playing and you go over and you say, "nice backhand, how'd you do that?" And after that, when they start thinking about it, they won't be able to do it, they'll be so befuddled. And it's the same thing when people say to me, you're so creative. How did you do that? How did you think of that? And I have to go back and say, I don't really know. It's just the way that I think, but when I go back and try to analyze it, I get a little paralyzed.

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This happened, I have this example that I use on occasion because it was surprising to me as well, when it came up. This scientist, brilliant scientist, who works in an area, he is sort of the father of something called zinc finger. And they're this, this concept of DNA, portions of DNA that can be taken out and transplanted literally in people who have certain diseases is fairly new and very exciting. And they're doing one with AIDS. And I was actually able to see this strand of DNA, which kind of looks like snot. And he, they were talking about that they would, these people who have HIV never develop AIDS and they were going to take this transplant in people who did have AIDS, and by doing that these people would be basically AIDS free. I asked him, and this is very exciting stuff, this is very, very creative. This is the kind of thing that it goes beyond writing. How did people come up with this idea? And I said, well, what is the mechanism for that, is, you know, in this cell, in this, you know, cellular structure, this molecule, is it something that the virus can't latch on to? Is it something that repels it and it's lacking the latch? And I said, oh, that it's sort of like spilling oil on a boat so Somali pirates can't get aboard? And he looked at me and he said, how the hell did you think of that? I said, I don't know how the hell do you think of what you do? And I and I went back and I thought about this. And I realized that some of this has to do with our experiences and what we observe in the world. So in effect, all of us have this capability to be creative. The part of that, we don't, not all creative minds think alike has to do with what fosters creativity. I'll tell you one thing that does not: analyzing your own work and the way that analyzing a tennis play will undo you completely.

A really good example of how bad it can be was after I was published the first time with *Joy Luck Club*, I went to a bookstore and was standing in the back waiting. And, and I saw next to me this rack and they had the yellow and black booklets there that I recognized from days in college where I actually use something called CliffsNotes. And I saw some that I had actually used and I felt pretty ashamed. But then, you know, these people, these writers, you know, they were dead and they wouldn't know how ashamed I was. But I saw another one and I recognized the title and I pulled it out and it said *The Joy Luck Club*. And I thought, umm, I'm not dead yet. Or maybe I am, you know, this is an existential question that you ask, you know, what do you really know? You know, what is consciousness? What do you really know? So I opened this up, there's my life deconstructed for me. And it's very methodical. This is very anti-creative, and that is to go chronologically. So it says Amy Tan was born, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And it's all true. It's all the stuff that is absolutely true, but it was not very creative. I got to a part, though, was a very good interpretation of my life that I never would have made. It said that I had a boyfriend named Frans when I was 16. And described him as my, this older German man who had close contacts with drug dealers and organized crime. You know, when I saw that, and I said, wow, is that my Frans, you know, I mean, he was 22 but so he's older and I said, and he knew a couple of Canadian hippies as friends and they sold hashish but they weren't that organized about it. So, little creative embellishment there.

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I saw something else, you know, people, there was a phrase called, that I used in the book called invisible strength. And it was analyzed that what I had done was I used that to represent the power of women, of foreigners, of people who were marginalized, you know, immigrants, all kinds of things. And I, you know, reading this and saying, wow, I'm so smart. It's one of those questions, I don't know if you've ever asked you know, when people analyze a book or you see it somewhere, do you say, is that what she really meant? And the answer is, not necessarily. Though that phrase, by the way, is something that came to me from my mother. And she used to say to me this, when I was fussing about something, she say, "*Fang pi bu-cho, cho pi bu-fang*," you know, and it was meaning basically, "no one wants to hear you make a big stink over nothing, so shut up." But the actual, the literal translation is, like, "loud farts don't smell. The really smelly ones are deadly silent." So this is the invisible strength. And it was like into the wind and all that, you know, and I put that in there. But you know, Cliffs didn't get that. He does not think creatively.

By the way, I love those CliffsNotes and whoever did it, I'm really thankful to them. They, you know, it's, it's an amazing, it's right up there. If I win the Nobel, CliffsNotes would be right next to it on the shelf, you know you're in, indoctrinated basically into American literature when you're in, in, in that.

So anyway, talking about creativity is so hard for me, it's, I have a number of writers are superstitious about talking about this, it's like you just handed yourself your own Mojo. You're, it has to be something unconscious in a way. But I have a tripart that I have come up with in my mind that kind of encapsulates what I think might be going on in it. I call it the three ends and they're nurture, nature and nightmares. Because what's you're, you know, when you look at something like curiosity, and you get to this creativity part, what is it that sort of proceeds it or goes into the middle? What's all that stuff? So I'd looked at it in terms of the, so nature, people would ask me, well, were you born with this talent? You know, I don't know, because I haven't had it the other way, the way my brain works, but you have to wonder, are certain people innately talented, say for music or for words or for whatever it is that enables a person to write. Did I have an extra large space for a dictionary, you know, in my brain? Or is it, and we do know, you know, there are parts of our brains that do various things and connect in certain ways to, you know, well, I'll give you an example. It was a friend of mine who is an autistic savant. He is, he talked, we were talking about this and he said, you know, in a very, in my brain, as an autistic, I have synesthesia, which means that all these different senses combined together. So if I see a number, I also see a color. And it enables him to memorize a lot of things. Daniel Tammet is his name, pi to 22,000 digits. I can't do that. But he said with creative people, he thinks that there's a common thing that happens. And that is this synesthesia, where we don't quite have the buffers in our brain that keeps one thing separate from the other. So it might be not that when I see numbers, I see colors or smell something, but the imagination does that automatically. So I have a theory that maybe some of us are born with what I call loose wires. Something has been allowed to freely traverse between different boundaries. I also think of them maybe as Venn diagrams where you could make, because of this freedom, these, these spaces that you are maybe able to make overlaps of associations and associations come from your experiences in life. So that's part of the theory.

The other part of the theory is nature, which is who I was born to, a mother and a father. My father was a Baptist minister who

had very consistent beliefs. He was a Christian, you know, Father, Son, Holy Ghost, family of 12 kids, he was the oldest, lived in China, came to the States, became a minister and electrical engineer. My mother was born in Shanghai, and she was, believed in the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, as well as Chinese ghosts as well as karmic retribution and curses. My mother, in fact believed at one point that I was somebody reincarnated from her past life and that I had come there to torture her. And she would say, you know, how mothers will say, what did I do to make you like this? You know, and my mother said that to me, but she meant from a past life, you know, what did I do? She would also say to me, are you so and so as though I have, was still that person and I was like a ghost who was inhabiting a body. These beliefs, of course, were very different from the kids in my neighborhood. And it often, you know, they, it clashed, because my father believed this, and my mother believed this and her beliefs were inconsistent, so I thought at the time that she, you know, believed whatever she wanted, I look back and I think what she believed in was pragmatism. She believed in survival, and she would do anything she could pull out to make it the best possibility. That confusion in beliefs led me to ask questions in my life. And the questions are ones that I use as a writer and as a person in daily life. And that is, there's a major one and existential one that I think we all ask from time to time and that is, who am I? What is my essential self that makes me different from other people? Before I leave this earth, what will I have been? What bit of energy have I been? The other part of that is your cosmology of how things happen in the universe, planet Earth. Is it the belief that everything is random or there is a kind of determinism going on set in place a long time ago? Or is it that you, there are connections and you get help from people or there's luck or there's divine power or there's, there's a cosmological plan set in place. And all of that is part of what a novelist does and explaining what goes on in a narrative. It has a lot to do with what happens next, and why, you know, what intervenes in all these different ways. So those questions have been very important. It was, I forget about them every now and then. But it was brought home to me recently and very clearly when I received a text message from a dear friend of mine, who is an opera singer and she has stage four lung cancer. She was diagnosed three years ago, and at the time she had tumors in her lungs or liver, her bones, her spine, her neck, she had 24 brain tumors, she had in her lymph nodes, so it was all over the place. And she was, you know, two months to live is what they thought. It's now three years. But she had been having a particularly hard time. And she sent me a text message and she said, Amy, please tell me what is your meaning in life. I have

forgotten what mine is. She said, what is it that when you get up in the morning, makes you think this is the meaning of my life? And I read that and it was such an emphasis of what I mean by that question of who I am. The curiosity then that I'm talking about is not what would it be like to skydive, it is a curiosity of what must I know and it has to do with who we are and what's going to enable us to survive in some of the worst times in our life and, and enjoy some of the best times in in our life at the deepest levels.

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Rachel Solomon: Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club* and numerous other bestselling novels. Tan spoke at the University of Washington's Meany Hall on January 12, 2012. You can learn more and hear the whole hour of her talk by going to KUOW.org.SpeakersForum. Jason Pagano recorded this talk. I'm Rachel Solomon, KUOW, 949, Seattle.

Bill O'Grady, KUOW: 8:23 949 KUOW. Louis Gong is an educator and artist who creates contemporary urban art inspired by traditional Coast Salish design. Hear him talk about how spontaneous ceremony from a loved one prepared him for the nerve racking challenge of talking to thousands of natives about the mixed heritage experience in today's world. That's tomorrow afternoon in the two o'clock hour. Lows around 40 tonight, says the forecast, breezy, mostly cloudy, chance of rain. Friday highs near 50. Windy, mostly cloudy with a chance of rain in the morning, rain in the afternoon. A review of the week's news with Knute Berger, editor at large of *Seattle Magazine*, Lynne Varner an editorial columnist at the *Seattle Times*, Eli Sanders an associate editor at *The Stranger*, and you, we hope, will be along with your contributions as well. It's tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock.

Rachel Solomon: From 949 KUOW Seattle, I'm Rachel Solomon. This is Speakers Forum. Many of our parents keep secrets from us. There's probably a whole lot about our parents' lives that maybe we're better off not knowing. Novelist Amy Tan was surprised to find out her mother's secrets when she did a little digging. Tan is the author of *The Joy Luck Club* and numerous other best selling novels. She spoke at the University of Washington's Meany Hall on January 12, 2012 about her creative process in a talk called, "Creative minds do not think alike." Next, Tan talks about the differences and similarities between her and her mother.

Amy Tan: Now my mother had a number of secrets in her past that became part of who I am. One is that her mother died when she was nine. And she said she died by accident. She was the first wife of a rich man. I found out later, she was not the first wife. She was a concubine. She was the fourth wife. I found out later, when I wrote a story, and I changed that it was an accident, that it was suicide. That, that was actually true, what I had written in the story. I can, I found out that the first husband was, she was not the first wife to that one, she was the second, these secrets that keep unfolding over time, that become part of who I am. So my mother, with this background of a mother who killed herself, who she had watched die slowly over two days, had become, has, she is in my life because of what she embedded in my mother. My mother became a worrier, and she passed down a lot of warnings. So they would go like this. This would be a good one for Seattle. Don't cross the street without looking, okay? All mothers say that, don't cross the street until it turns green. My mother would add this bit was, you don't watch, you get smashed flat just like a sanddab. And when she would say something you would never forget that. It's an image. It's a, it's a metaphor for something you don't want. You know I can forever use a sanddab from now on to mean anything that is unpleasant and a warning. My mother also said about boys, she didn't want me to get in trouble. And she said when I was 11 or so and knew nothing about sex and she said, don't let a boy kiss you. Because if you do, maybe you can't stop. And then you're going to have a baby. And then you're going to be so ashamed you're going to put the baby in the garbage can. And then the police is going to come and they take you away, put you in jail the rest of your life, you might as well just kill yourself right now. You know, and I thought to myself, I wasn't that scared because I, you know, I thought to myself, what is so good, you can't stop? That was the message. I didn't, I listened to her advice. I don't have any kids, you know, so I listened to her advice.

She also, one time, she had a warning about unwashed fruit. She was always telling me you have to wash your fruit, you know, some of these things she came up with and she was right. You know about warnings about toxins, warnings about pollution. But she said to me that we had to wash our fruit and one day the little girl from down the street died. She probably died of leukemia or something like that. But I wanted to see her, Rachel, and my mother agreed to take me and we walked to the, we were walking down the aisle to see Rachel. And there she was. I had never expected what I was going to see, there is Rachel lying there with her hands crossed over her chest and she does not look happy. And I'm terrified and my

mother uses that moment to lean over and says this is what happens when you don't listen to your mother and she said that Rachel did not wash her fruit.

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Ok, these are the kinds of experiences that go into, feed into your imagination and come out later in a slightly warped form that you people call creativity. My mother, I found out later, you know, she would never tell me the context of these things. And, and those warnings about the babies and things like that had come from secrets she kept from me, which is she had been married before, my, she wasn't the minister's wife who had, you know, had been the virginal young woman, she was married and had three daughters and she left them in China. I didn't find this out until I was about 15. And I will say this, I continue to find secrets over time being revealed to me. When she gave me these warnings, despite all of these things, saying cautions and what you should do, it still didn't work. Because one year when I, in 1967, my brother who was 16 at the time, my older brother, became ill, and it was determined he had a brain tumor. And my mother, I, my mother was the sort of person who got so upset about anything that happened to us that I felt, I fell off a tree once with a nail that was stuck here and it sliced me all the way down to here into my leg and dug into my flesh. So you could see down the bone, and I didn't want her to freak out and just spend the next week yelling at me for doing that. I didn't tell her. So that is how much, you know, my, we feared my mother being upset about things. My brother had a brain tumor. My mother went into, how did this happen? What are we going to do? Why us? All these existential questions having to do with survival. She went looking for answers, and she, before she could find it, my father who had been praying for the miracle, he became ill and it was determined that he had a brain tumor as well.

My mother then pulled out all the beliefs. Is this God's will? Is this something in the ground that's poisoned us? Is this fate? Is this bad, what is this bad luck consist of? Is this karmic retribution? Is this a curse? The only thing my mother did not believe in was randomness. Everything had a reason. And I was drawn into this vortex of her trying to find the reason. If she can find the reason, she could possibly undo this. And when you think about curiosity or the must know, there's a reason why you must know of what it's going to lead to. And that is the kind of, the questions that I, that I grew up with. My mother, you know, she would say, well, what am I going to do next? And she would play through all of these scenarios. And one of them, you know, she wanted to get advice from everybody, and she

decided to get advice from my father and my brother who had died. And of course, the way she was going to do that was through me. And the way I was supposed to do that was through a Ouija board. So she had me sit down and she would pose the questions and she would say, what I should invest in? IBM or US Steel? And I had to provide these answers. Now I'm this solemn girl and I want nothing to do with this, this crazy mother. So I just take this planchette and you know, U, so US Steel, you know, and that's what she would invest in. It's true. She did really well in the stock market too, at the end of her life, it was pretty amazing because she was a widow, she, you know, worked, had these two kids.

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And I remember another time she said, Amy treat me so bad, what I should do? Send her Taiwan School for bad girls? It's like, no. You don't have to be creative for that. You just do it. She found signs, now this is what happens. You see signs in everything. Some people have said that creative people have a form of psychosis in which they see things that don't really exist or they see patterns, they see connections, they see conspiracies. My mother saw signs in everything. She one day reached under the sink and she was cleaning it out. She brought out this cleanser. It was old Dutch cleanser and she looked at it, she thought, and she called us, we were watching television. And, and she said Holland. Holland is clean. We're moving to Holland. You laugh. She sold the furniture, sold the house, sold the car, got us, new suitcases, packed everything that we would need to live in Holland. We sail to Holland on the Holland America Line. My mother did not know anyone in Holland. She didn't speak the language. You know, we ate out of vending machines because we didn't know what we're ordering. She was crazy. You know?

I thought it was the most wonderful thing that happened, that she went crazy in this way. We were a family who had never been outside of California, California, we had been on two vacations both to Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm and Marine World. So this is the first time leaving California, and there we were in a foreign country. And I went wild. I could determine that everything that I was supposed to believe in. I was the good Christian girl, went to church every day, the miracle didn't happen. I listened to my mother. Nothing happened there. Except anxiety. I was going to find my own way in another country. I soon found, we found a wonderful house overlooking Lake Geneva in the Alps. Little chalet, you know, Heidi, Heidi could have lived there, a dark Bavarian wood kind of place. My mother bought us yogurt and this cuckoo

clock, a stereotype of all of this, and I in that location, had my first boyfriend, Frans, the older German man. He was so handsome. He had curly hair and my, my brother said he looked like Larry of the Three Stooges. I thought he was more like Art Garfunkel. I saw a picture actually recently and he did certainly look like Larry the Three Stooges. He was a rebel. He deserted the German army. He smoked cigarettes, he had stains on his fingers. He didn't have a boring, regular job. He played foosball all day long. And he was very, very good. He never had to put in the money everybody else had to pay. And for some reason my mother did not think this guy was wonderful for me. She talked about the baby and the garbage can and that I will kill myself. I was in this very rebellious mode and I decided that one of the best things I could do is prove her wrong. So I didn't go past kissing. I wanted to show that I could stop, I didn't tell her that, I wanted her to think that I was just having babies galore, but I wanted to prove that I could stop. My mother was so terrified of what would happen she thought of what happened to her mother. She thought of what happened to her when she had this other husband who abused her, who she nearly killed herself because of this man. She became so desperate about why we were here and maybe we shouldn't be here. Maybe we should join my brother and my father. She came in the room one day, locked me in there with the skeleton key, had a cleaver and put it to my throat, and she was crazy. I could see it in her eyes. She said, I'm going to have to kill you. I cannot watch what's going to happen and we're going to die anyway. So I'm going to kill you, and then John, and then myself and we will go be with them. The feeling that I, I think that we had as a family at that point was that of a cult, that we were the only ones who understood what had happened to us and nobody knew. And in a way it was okay what she was going to do to me. But somehow, and I, I did not remember this for a very long time. Somehow, my voice came out after just saying, go, I said to her, go ahead and do it. And after a while, my voice came out and said, I want to live, I want to live, I want to live, and she, she did not kill me. Years later, I thought maybe I imagined that, maybe, you know, it's one of these repressed memories that, and it's, it's a one and error. And I mentioned something to her and she said, oh yeah, you were bad. I wanted to kill you, you were and she just went on and she didn't have, to her, it was absolutely natural that she would feel this way.

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My mother went into all kinds of creative ways to get rid of my boyfriend. And one was to hire the detective who was also the mayor of the town of Montreux where we lived, a very small

town. And she also handed in my diary, which I had written in Spanish, I thought it was so clever. She, she had it, they had it translated into French. And they followed my boyfriend and his hippie friends around the lakefront and we were all arrested. Fortunately, I was underage and I was let go but my boyfriend and his hippie friends were put in jail and then deported and that is how you get rid of your daughter's boyfriend. I think what my mother taught me was persistence. That you always will find a way, you don't give up, and it is an essential quality. As an artist, as a writer, for me, that you do not give up. And you find what other people have not looked at. Going a different way is what my mother called it. Anyway, my boyfriend was deported and she did something wonderful, which is when he was in France, she said, I'll take you to see him again. I thought, this is great. And I went there. And because she had brought me there, all that glue that had connected us had immediately dissolved. And I looked at that guy and I said, Wow, he's a loser. He was a very nice guy actually but I realized how bad that situation would have been for me.

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Now, I have given you a little brief overview of my childhood, the kinds of things that go into who I am as a writer, and people say, well, you have a lot of material. You know, you can write about this mother who's like this, and about these situations and the secrets and all that. But what I really got out of that childhood, what, were the questions and the inconsistencies, the contradictions and the need to find these beliefs. I found out that it was very good to have ambiguity in my life. Because if I took what people believed, whether it's a religion or a political party, and I took those wholesale as my beliefs, I'm going to fail myself, eventually, just as I failed when my parents believed I was going to become a doctor, and a concert pianist, that these were the beliefs handed to me. As a writer, I find moral ambiguity and discomfort in my life, and I construct my stories around those things. It's funny, you know, when I talk to people, they always think that what I'm writing about is culture, or generations, or mothers and daughters, and that is all part of it. But really, what I'm talking about is who am I and these moral ambiguities, these truths of who I am and how I came to be, and what in my past has been handed down to me without my being conscious of it. And what things have I chosen, did, or deliberately rejected. Those are the things I want to know because when something bad happens, I have to call upon what it is I know in myself, and I take all of that and put it into my writing. So I had a story, I will just tell you this one brief thing that recently happened to me and it was that I had believed

certain things about my family that had been told to me. My grandmother being the first wife of a scholar, and he having died during the bird flu of 1918. And then her being raped and becoming a concubine. It is a very tragic story. But then I also, you know, people, she's this tragic, quiet figure. She was a traditional person, my cousin said, old fashioned, stayed at home. I found a photo in a book that was about courtesans in Shanghai. I had been at a museum and this had been written by an academic and there, I saw a beautiful photograph of 10 courtesans and they are dressed identically to my grandmother in my favorite portrait of her. And I had to ask myself, was she a courtesan? Now that's the part that people would say, well, that's the story. That's what's really interesting, you write about that. But no, the question to me was, if she had been this person, what is it about her, then, that was passed along to my mother and then to me, a love of costumes, for example, wearing a dominatrix costume or something, but there's something about a strength, there's something about a defiance and there was something there in her photo and these other photos of her, there was a look of defiance. And so I wanted to understand, when you are faced with a situation that is not of your own choosing, what would you do to survive that, to become your own person and not give in to that. I did some research and found out that she had been a very strong person in this household with all these wives, seven wives eventually, she was the one they were afraid of. Because when she wanted her way, she would demand it and they all had to listen. And I, when I found that out, that she was not the old fashioned, the old traditional person, I said, yes, because this is the strength that runs through our family.

I go back to that question that my friend Jang posed to me and that is, what is your meaning in life? What is it that you think of when you get up in the morning? That is your meaning, your reason to get up? It is those difficult questions in which I have to observe life and I realized that what it is, is to think deeply, to feel deeply, to live deeply.

Thank you very much.

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Rachel Solomon: Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club* and numerous other best selling novels. Tan spoke at the University of Washington's Meany Hall on January 12, 2012. You can learn more and hear the whole hour of her talk by going to kuow.org/speakersforum. Jason Pagano recorded this talk. I'm Rachel Solomon, KUOW, 949 Seattle.

Bill O'Grady, KUOW: More from Amy Tan in the moment 8:47 949 KUOW. A kidnapping victim in Colombia who spends his nights listening to a radio station that plays messages from the families of the kidnapped, that and other stories of people held captive by criminals, by paperwork, and in one man's case, by his own body and the ways they try to cope. That's this week's edition of *This American Life*, tomorrow evening at seven o'clock. Former Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels tells why he wants to be Washington's next Secretary of State. That'll be tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. Lows around 40 says the forecast for tonight, breezy, mostly cloudy, chance of rain. Friday's prediction highs near 50. Windy, mostly cloudy with a chance of rain in the morning, rain in the afternoon. Bellingham resident Michael Bar talks about the many frustrations he and his wife went through to have children. Also film critic Robert Horton looks at the tradition of songs in movies and the meager Best Song Academy Award nominees this year. And Seattle Chef John Howie talks about his collection of stories and recipes called *Passion and Palate, Recipes for a Generous Table*. That's all next hour beginning right after the nine o'clock news.

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Q&A SESSION

Rachel Solomon: From KUOW 949, Seattle, I'm Rachel Solomon. This is Speakers Forum. Amy Tan is the best selling author of *The Joy Luck Club*, which focuses on for Chinese American families in San Francisco. Tan drew on some of her own experiences to write the 1989 novel. She was born in the United States to Chinese immigrant parents. Tan spoke at the University of Washington's Meany Hall on January 12, 2012, about her creative process in a talk called "Creative minds do not think alike." Next, Tan takes questions from the audience. The first question is, what made you become a writer?

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Amy Tan: I'll tell you what made me not become a writer first. I was never encouraged and I'd never had role models of who would be a woman writer who is a woman. In college I only read one writer who's a woman, that was Virginia Woolf. I didn't become a writer because there was no money in it. And I had to earn a living and my mother would have, you know, killed me if I tried to do anything that stupid. So when I decided to become a writer, it was out of this quality of existential angst

over who was I and what I'm doing is meaningless. I was, I was a business writer, freelance, and it was very successful, I had a lot of clients. I often had 12 projects at one time. My clients were lovely, I, they treated me well and I made a lot of money. And I would go down each day into my office and say to myself, is this what I will be doing in 10 years? Because it paid me well, it was a subject that I had no intrinsic interest in, telecommunications, you know, excitement of ISDN arriving, this is in the 80s. And, and I said, what can I do that's meaningful to me? And I decided on two things I would try, one is jazz piano because here was a chance to express myself through music, creatively, you know, this would be improvisation, jazz.

And the other was to write fiction, because I had always liked writing. I had written letters. So I would just love to read and I started to do this. Somewhere along the line, I found that it was more than just having fancy prose and a certain skill in sequencing a story. My early criticism was that my stories were inauthentic. And they were, I tried to write in the voice of, oh, you know, a girl who lived in Massachusetts whose father taught it at MIT, and, you know, mother was a high society lady. And I gave that up and I got friends who said that was terrible. And I got I sent it out to a few places like the *New Yorker* and got my rejection, I put them up, you know, on the bulletin board. And I decided what I should do is just write what I feel I should explore. And I wrote a story about a girl whose mother had expectations and she was a Chinese chess player, this little girl. And I discovered something in there that was so much, was such a surprise. It was like walking into a door and finding another part of myself in there, finding me, and I, I decided I would write fiction for myself. I wouldn't have anybody with expectations hanging over me. I had no expectations to make money out of it. I loved the craft. It would be dedicated to that, and I would keep trying to find those moments where I would walk through the door and discover myself.

I did give myself a goal to take it seriously because I knew I had a habit of being a dilettante and dropping things. And I said that I would work toward getting published in a, in a good little magazine, which be like, *Ploughshares*, and, by the time I was 70, and you may laugh, but you know, it's, it's yeah, if you say to yourself, well, I'm going to be, I know these certain people. I'm going to be like Bill Gates, and I'm gonna be a millionaire by the time I'm 20. What's going to happen when you reach 20 and that happens, so I didn't want that kind of, I wanted, something that would make me serious. But I didn't want to feel that I had failed for the reason of publication. That's when I

think I became a writer, a writer in the sense of what is the most important part of writing to me is to ask questions, to find meaning, to find ambiguity, to find myself, and to know that I'm never going to be complete and it's never going to be one thing, I'm transforming all the time. And the, the part about getting published was a complete and total unexpected surprise. In fact, it scared me that it was happening so quickly. I said something to my husband about it, you know, I don't understand, I feel like something, some other force is pushing me because whenever I don't follow through on it, something happens.

People call, we want to publish this or when my book was published, you think most people would celebrate and be so joyous, publication date, you know, first book. I cried. I was so depressed, because I didn't understand it. I didn't understand what had happened to me and it made me afraid. I didn't want to trust it. That's something my mother taught me, don't trust anything because it'll go away. Not it might go away, it'll go away and she's right. And in the best sense, you know, it's going to go away. You are wonderful fans of my work or assuming you are, you know, you're here sitting in this, listening to me. But one day, you might go away and decide, you know, to read somebody else, all the time and just say, oh, you know, she was terrible compared to this person or you're on a list and you fall off the list. There goes your meaning in life. So, I think it's good my mother taught me it'll go away. You have to know what it is and not take that as who you are. So I cried because this thing was terrifying me that if I took it and I believed in it, I was going to get in real trouble.

One more question.

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Participant 1: In *Joy Luck Club*, you consistently portray Asian male characters in a negative manner. And in contrast with white male characters, while flawed, are plenty more sympathetic, for example, the white guy that broke up with the Asian girl, even after the break up, he said, well, I wish you were more assertive, encouraging her to be more independent. By portraying this contrast, it had the unfortunate effect of contributing to the same racism that you yourself have experienced. What is the reason that you chose to portray characters in that manner?

Amy Tan: For one thing, you know, in a book, it is not to represent all of people. I've had people ask me this question also about why do you have mothers who speak in broken English? Why do you have concubines, women who are

concubines? You know, that you are contributing to a stereotype that's out there that people are less or people are better than, than others? One of the, you know, if I were to look at all the reasons why I do that, some of it is drawn from what is important to me in the history, okay, my mother had a very horrible husband. And what she has said to me, this character, the image of this person comes up in my fiction over and over again. I cannot write about my father because he died when I was young, and he's perfect. Perfect characters do not make good fictional characters. But I know I've heard from a man before that I have denigrated Asian American men or Asian men, you know, through this portrayal, but I have to remind people, fiction is not representative of a whole culture, of a whole gender of, of all those things, and that people who find the books offensive, if they find portrayals in there about the mothers or I've had mothers who are angry at me about the broken English, that it's good to find other books that are not that way. I do feel, I do feel it's a real danger if people were to take literature, fiction, and try to right wrongs with it, because that is what has been done in the past during the Cultural Revolution Bolshevik Russian they were assigned to get rid of the power, powerful images that had dominated people and you get very inauthentic fiction then. I write from what is very very personal and I know you know not everybody's gonna like it and I'm, I'm sorry that it offended you so much. I obviously do not have, you know, this thing where I think, you know, mothers who speak broken English that that is the way that all women are. In fact, if anything, I want people to look at characters like that and say, you know, I used to think that way about people, and that these people are less. And I find, I find it's not true that they have as much to say. What I also like, somebody had gone around and written a list of 10 most overrated novels and I was happy to make that list. Although I had wished to be more overrated, I think I was only four or something like that. Somebody said, what do you feel about that? And I said, it's great, because literature should inspire discussion. It should inspire dissension and, and objection and be vital and be lively. And so, you know, I encourage people, those who find something in whatever they read to not be your experience and for you to want to find another book that is but also say why it is that is not that way. Not everybody will agree, but literature should inspire that kind of discussion.

Thank you.

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