

# Book Review

## *The Bonesetter's Daughter*

Amy Tan

New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

### Truth and Its Mediators

Amy Tan's fourth book, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, explores the mainstay of Tan's works: Chinese immigrant mother-daughter relationships and a question of cultural identities. What sets this novel apart from her other works is Tan's focus on dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease. The neurodegenerative disease complicates the multi-generational quest for truth in the novel, calling assumptions and memories into question.

The story focuses on the unravelling of LuLing Liu Young's cognitive functions as her daughter, Ruth Young, attempts to piece together her mother's life story. This is helpfully provided in a memoir LuLing had written years prior in traditional, vertical Chinese calligraphy. Notably, the memoir begins with a giant character for "Truth (真)," written in LuLing's former masterful hand. Ruth muses that her mother must have written it when she began to feel her own decline, fearing that LuLing would forget "the things I

know are true”<sup>1</sup> and “the things I must not forget.”<sup>2</sup> While the truths of LuLing’s life are revealed in due time to both Ruth and the reader, Tan is able to expand this quest for truth about LuLing’s “Precious Auntie,” the titular bonesetter’s daughter, well into the present day.

Much like the stratification Tan employed in her previous works, the book divides itself between the present day and the mother’s past, allowing the reader to make sense of the quirks and eccentricities of its characters through a lens of culture and nuance. Communication of different truths is a major theme in the work. Ruth, a ghostwriter, contemplates her lifelong job translating for her mother as the task that honed her craft: first in the literal sense during her childhood years, and then constantly rationalizing how and why her mother would arrive at certain answers in the present day. She despairs over what others might perceive to be non sequiturs, phrases that are “free floating as dust motes”<sup>3</sup> and feels the need to defend her mother—that her mother has not yet been as lost to dementia as they might perceive—by explaining that she must translate something in her mind into Chinese first, formulate a response, and then translate that back to English.

Apart from the literary device Tan employs vis-à-vis LuLing’s memoirs to move the story along, language is also

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Tan, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tan, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Tan, 110.

manifested in many forms. The reader can see this from the “hand-talk, face-talk, chalk-talk” the mute Precious Auntie is limited to with LuLing,<sup>4</sup> the sand writing Ruth does for LuLing in their attempts at clairvoyance,<sup>5</sup> the food used as a symbol of conciliation,<sup>6</sup> and to the comparison of the love between Precious Auntie and Baby Uncle as “the language of shooting stars.”<sup>7</sup>

Tan also draws from her own well of experience, navigating the cultural differences of communication between the high context, hidden meanings of the doublespeak style familiar to first-generation immigrants and the more straightforward mode favored by their children. This is explained several times in the novel, from LuLing’s descriptions of having to be asked at least three times before agreeing to accept a gift or favor, to giving Ruth her memoir with an “awkward nonchalance that meant the pages were important.”<sup>8</sup> Ruth later reflects on her mother’s dementia, likening it to a “truth serum” that slowly ate away at any pretensions of ingrained modesty and doublespeak.<sup>9</sup> Dementia thus acts as a vehicle for truth, eating away at the lies LuLing confesses to in her memoirs and allowing Ruth to discover their lineage to the Bonesetters of the Mouth of

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<sup>4</sup> Tan, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Tan, 85.

<sup>6</sup> Tan, 162.

<sup>7</sup> Tan, 195.

<sup>8</sup> Tan, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Tan, 351.

the Mountain and Immortal Heart Village. LuLing's deterioration also eats away at the caution she has built over the years, revealing clues to the truths she had tried to hide for years out of shame and fear: fear of deportation, fear of rejection by her late husband, and then fear of the shame and resentment her own daughter would feel.

Dementia is another major theme, appearing multiple times in the story. Ruth confronts her mother's diagnosis with great anxiety, and Tan vividly describes the emotions that any loved one of a dementia patient goes through: denial, vulnerability, confusion, and guilt. Ruth finds herself constantly needing to comfort and protect her mother while also seeking these herself, and that while she still finds herself adjusting and translating for her mother, she now feels terror where once was annoyance.<sup>10</sup> Truth in this way is mediated by time and context, with Ruth reflecting multiple times in the novel that they have begun exchanging roles as mother and daughter.

The exchange of roles is also apparent in the way truths and lies weave themselves into the present day: while LuLing's dementia begins to reveal long-hidden truths, her dementia in turn pushes Ruth to use white lies to bond with her mother and slow her inevitable deterioration. LuLing's dementia manifests in several tell-tale signs throughout the text, from accusations and hallucinations, rejecting help, and perhaps most heartbreaking, to slowly forgetting how a

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<sup>10</sup> Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, 65.

word is written. Ruth looks at this painfully, seeing the same unfinished character written over and over, always incomplete at a crucial stroke.<sup>11</sup> One white lie allows Ruth to ask LuLing to use her prowess in calligraphy, claiming it will be important for her next book project: in this way she is able to keep her mother's pride intact. LuLing's determination to make herself useful allows Ruth to reflect on their relationship through the lens of anticipatory grief, prematurely mourning her mother's gradual decline and eventual loss several times in the book.<sup>12</sup>

In her memoirs, the reader can surmise that other characters from LuLing's past have experienced some form of dementia: from the Liu matriarch "Great-Granny," to the old masters that her first husband Kai Jing alludes to—those who have "lost their minds and become children again."<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps nothing short of tragic then, when LuLing begins to develop the same symptoms as Great-Granny, whom she once described as having "thoughts that were like crumbling walls, stones without mortar."<sup>14</sup> Because of her diagnosis, the veracity of her words and actions are called into question by the other characters in the book, from her own daughter racing to untangle and rationalize her thought process, to Ruth's boyfriend Art and his daughters sharing looks of

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<sup>11</sup> Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Tan, 344–5.

<sup>13</sup> Tan, 277.

<sup>14</sup> Tan, 178.

confusion.<sup>15</sup> LuLing's words and assertions of truth are thus questioned by others' perception based on her perceived eccentricity, compounded by her medical condition.

Superstition plays a great part in mediating truth during Precious Auntie's and LuLing's past, owing to a different time and context. Baby Uncle and Chang the coffin maker both meet fortune tellers for a marriage consultation for Precious Auntie's hand, and the fortune tellers provide different answers based on astrology and physiognomy.<sup>16</sup> In another situation, Great-Granny claims to have been visited by the ghost of Baby Uncle, warning the Lius against sending Precious Auntie and her child away.<sup>17</sup> Tan skillfully inserts these into her narrative, using richly-described anecdotes to display to the reader the fickle nature of fallible metrics by which man once understood the world. She paints a tableau for readers to understand how deeply embedded superstition is in the multi-generational Chinese psyche and how these obscured the truths her characters were searching for.

Authority also mediates truth in the novel, manifesting first in the Lius refusing to believe any other version of the truth but what they had been initially fed regarding Baby Uncle's death,<sup>18</sup> and later on when LuLing and GaoLing lie

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<sup>15</sup> Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Tan, 191–3.

<sup>17</sup> Tan, 199.

<sup>18</sup> Tan, 207.

on their visa applications.<sup>19</sup> Tan draws on parallels in mediating truth through necessity, first through the recollection of how LuLing and GaoLing became sisters, and then why it became necessary to continue living this lie even after their migration to America.

Ultimately, love and loyalty become the arbiters of truth through the relationships between LuLing, Ruth, and even GaoLing. Astute readers may perhaps sense that the greatest injustice falls on the character of GaoLing; she who remained fiercely loyal to LuLing—from a tearful teenage GaoLing swearing loyalty and promising to never think of her as anything but a Big Sister, to a disappointed aunt who immediately rejects Ruth’s suggestion of putting LuLing in a nursing home, putting herself forward as a caretaker for someone who in reality was only five months older than she. Readers would be able to sense that this is no longer the doublespeak or false modesty that characterized much of older Chinese idiosyncrasy, but rather an expression of the decades-long loyalty and protectiveness GaoLing felt toward the woman she considered her Big Sister.

Ironically, it is only GaoLing who dismisses the dementia diagnosis, claiming that her Big Sister merely experiences confusion that can be remedied by her favorite panacea, ginseng root, which she generously provides. Her belief is mediated by experience, perhaps mixed in with denial, and the hope that her Big Sister is still cognitively intact.

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<sup>19</sup> Tan, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, 324.

GaoLing has carried feelings of both gratitude and guilt for the sacrifices LuLing made on her behalf that by the end of the novel, when she finally comes to terms with LuLing's dementia, she reflects that she was never able to repay her debt despite showering her Big Sister with gifts throughout the years. Quite unfortunately then, is how cynically these were interpreted by LuLing for decades, harboring suspicion of GaoLing's intentions. Near the end of the novel, GaoLing is able to unburden herself of the secrets she and LuLing kept, and it is also she who attempts to exhaust any and all connections to their village to finally learn Precious Auntie's name. Perhaps in this way, by telling her niece her truth and being able to provide answers, she is able to feel that she can finally repay her Big Sister. Ruth's gratitude and relief are skillfully communicated, as she finally thinks that Precious Auntie's identity had been returned to her. Truth is seen here as mediated by identity markers, names being a humanizing element in one's existence, and that the forgetting and rediscovery of this lost truth makes Ruth think that Precious Auntie's identity has been restored, that "She had existed. She still existed."<sup>20</sup>

Tan also makes masterful work of the multitudinous and context-rich nature of Chinese characters. Their homophonic nature is delved into heavily toward the latter part of the book, with Ruth speaking to GaoLing about her mother's memoir. GaoLing reveals that "Precious Auntie"

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<sup>20</sup> Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, 398.

(“Bao Bomu”) was an honorific and pet name that only LuLing used, adapted from what the rest of the Liu clan called her, “Nursemaid” (“Bao Mu”)<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps the deftest use of the homophonic nature, however, is in the final revelation of Precious Auntie’s name. In a moment of brief lucidity while in the oracle bone exhibit of the Asian Art Museum, LuLing suddenly remembers that Precious Auntie’s surname was “Gu.” Ruth is dismayed at this, thinking that her mother must have simply taken the character for bone (骨), also pronounced “Gu,” since she was looking at an oracle bone and that Precious Auntie came from a family of bonesetters. GaoLing later confirms LuLing’s recollection and adds that she had recently learned through a web of connections and resurfaced characters that her given name was “Liu Xin”—“to remain true,” a close homophone of “liu xing”—“shooting star,”<sup>22</sup> the same homophonic comparison Baby Uncle had used to court Precious Auntie more than eighty years prior.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* reflects the changing faces of what we accept as truth: a relative truth mediated by language, time, and context; mediated by cynical elements as

<sup>21</sup> GaoLing explains that while the term Bao Mu (保姆) meant only nursemaid, adding the “Bo” in the middle implicitly changed it to Bomu (伯母) or “Aunt,” and the preceding Bao could thus become the word for “Precious” (寶). The characters here not only share the same orthography but also the same tones of pronunciation.

<sup>22</sup> GaoLing tells Ruth that the characters for “Bone” (骨) and “Gorge” (谷) share the same pronunciation, and Precious Auntie’s name Liu Xin (留信) can sound almost similar to “shooting star,” “liu xing” (流星).

<sup>23</sup> Tan, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, 398.

perception, superstition, authority, and necessity; but also by the purest of intentions by loyalty and love.

It is another story of understanding and reconciliation between two women: first through Ruth's belated understanding of her mother's past, and then through a phone call from LuLing, where she apologizes to her daughter for any hurt that she may have forgotten she had caused. This phone call takes greater significance when one takes her dementia into account: how many times must she have thought of phoning her daughter to apologize before she finally did? How many times must she have repeated the thought, tried to form the words she was slowly losing, and then how many times still she tried to finish a thought before she lost it halfway through? Ruth realizes that "it was not too late for them to forgive each other and themselves,"<sup>24</sup> that generations of hurt could be healed through the same single character that began her mother's memoirs: Truth.

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<sup>24</sup> Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, 402.