

Amy Tan = Gene Wolfe revealed, pt 2

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 22 Aug 2008

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Jeff Wilson — 22 Aug 2008, 07:58

Just finished The Hundred Secret Senses by Amy Tan. Another intricate novel-length story consisting of many interrelated and interconnected shorter stories, it again features a Western-raised female narrator with a close but difficult relationship to an Eastern-raised female immediate family member, like The Bonesetter's Daughter.

This time it is the half-Chinese Olivia who narrates her life with her decade-plus older half-sister Kwan, brought to America after their father deathbed revelation of his previous family left behind in China. Kwan is a surrogate mother to the neglected Olivia, who learns Mandarin from Kwan's incessant tale-spinning of past lives and "Yin people" only she can see. This device again provides an unequalled view into the Asian cultural mindset, especially when the outer action moves to Kwan's home village of Changmian later in their lives.

The inner action is again very much like one of GW's fantastic stories, with Olivia taking the place of the not-entirely-obliging reader as she constantly struggles with the ambiguities both of idiomatic Mandarin and the possibly unreliable narrator Kwan who wanders afield into ghosts, reincarnation, body-hopping, time travel, war, religion, mercenaries, missionaries, prostitution, exploitative relationships, even some peculiar Taoist alchemy involving five apparent cloned creatures that make me wonder if there isn't a direct Wolfe influence on the book.

Nintey-five percent of the mysteries are wrapped up by the end of the book without doing disservice to eastern or western cultures, and hopefully it's not a spoiler to say this isn't nearly the weeper that

Daughter was, but still has four or five real tear-jerker moments. Recommended for those who enjoy GW stories, but hate not finding out what's really going on.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >