



Chinese Cinderella

Adeline Yen Mah

This book is the moving autobiography of a young Chinese girl, Adeline Yen Mah. Born the fifth child to an affluent Chinese family her life begins tragically. Adeline's mother died shortly after her birth due to complications brought on by the delivery, and in Chinese culture this marks her as cursed or 'bad luck' (p.3). This situation is compounded by her father's new marriage to a lady who has little affection for her husband's five children. She displayed overt antagonism and distrust towards all of the children, particularly Adeline, whilst favoring her own younger son and daughter born soon after the marriage. The book outlines Adeline's struggle to find a place where she feels she belongs. Denied love from her parents, she finds some solace in relationships with her grandfather Ye Ye, and her Aunt Baba, but they are taken from her. Adeline immerses herself in striving for academic achievement in the hope of winning favour, but also for its own rewards as she finds great pleasure in words and scholarly success.

The book was written following the successful publication of Adeline Yen Mah's first autobiography, *Falling Leaves*, which details the years of Adeline's life from fourteen years of age into adulthood.

'The secret story of an unwanted daughter' **(The book's subheading)**

The idea of an unwanted daughter, blamed for the death of her own mother, is a superstition that may have caused the abandonment of many.

- What is the strength of such a superstition?
- How does such a superstition come about?

In her life Adeline Yen Mah has been many things, a brilliant academic, doctor and a writer, yet it is the role of 'unwanted daughter' that plays heavily on her heart.

- Why is this so?
- Why does it overshadow all other achievements?
- Why is it so difficult to move beyond childhood hurts?

The pain felt by Adeline is acute and permeates almost every scene in the book. The story is, at times, a catalogue of one unhappy incident after another. Some events that display her anguish are particularly violent, cruel and senseless, as in the episode when her duck, PLT, is killed by the dog (p.94 onwards). Others show the power of cruel words to truly destroy the child's own sense of self worth. Adeline is an unwanted, even unnoticed daughter. Upon leaving her beloved grandfather's funeral, Niang (her stepmother) comments loudly that Adeline is becoming 'uglier and uglier as (she) grew older and taller' (p.213). An unnecessary and crushing remark made at a most difficult time.

Adeline suffers constant rejection from her stepmother but perhaps it is the indifference of her father that crushes Adeline more brutally. Most telling is the scene in the plane (p.40) in which her father remembers neither her real name nor her birthday. She is a forgotten child to him.

Adeline's answer is to immerse herself in academic life, pursuing success. Her personality, though, is scarred by her treatment at the hands of her parents. She has no sense of self, no sense of where she belongs. Her self-loathing and doubt are often intensely felt:

'They had tossed me aside like a piece of garbage' (p.143)

'Now they knew the pathetic truth! Unloved and unwanted by my own parents! How long did it take for a person to die of shame.' (p.129)

'I'm nothing. Less than nothing. A piece of garbage to be thrown out.' (p.207)

'Oh, the misery of it all! I felt I was being skinned alive. (p.214)

'Everything is ugly. I loathe myself.' (p.215)

Family offers us acceptance and a place to belong, affirmation, help and guidance, things Adeline lacks in her interaction with her parents – she is an 'unwanted daughter' in many senses of the word.

Structure

This autobiography is written in chronological order. It relies on the memories of Adeline presenting us vignettes, or small scenes, from her childhood. Because of this, the book often jumps periods during which Adeline either may remember little, or little of import happens, yet many scenes are vividly recalled. In a preface to the story, Adeline writes:

'Although *Chinese Cinderella* was written when I was in my late 50's, inside I am still the same little child yearning for the love of my parents.'

- How easy do you think it would be to recall events from so many years ago?
- Does a series of vignettes really enable us to come to a true understanding of what the life lived was like?
- Why, when we reconsider our lives, do certain scenes come to mind whilst others defy recall of any kind?
- To what extent do the early years of one's life shape the person that we become?

Autobiography

Autobiography and biography are very popular genres. They are both windows into the lives of others. For some readers these genre cater to the voyeuristic urge to view someone else's life, perhaps to allow comparison with our own existence or history.

- When reading such a story, do you compare the life to your own?
- Can you imagine writing about your own life?
- How easy do you think it is to write honestly about experiences that have affected you, or are all views subjective in the final analysis?

Consider the following quotations in the light of Adeline Yen Mah's story and your own views on the writing of life stories:

'Autobiography is probably the most respectable form of lying.'
Humphrey Carpenter, 1982

'Autobiography begins with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form.'
John Berger, 1992

'Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something truly disgraceful.'
George Orwell, 1944

'Richard Freadman, head of the unit for studies in biography and autobiography at Latrobe University, says part of the genre's attraction is the notion that we will discover more about ourselves if we read about the lives of others'.

Corrie Perkin 'The life to write movement' *The Age*, Sunday July 14th, 2002. p.13

Consider and compare other biography and autobiography. Possible texts that are part of this genre, though varied in style and content, are:

Adeline Yen Mah *Falling Leaves* (detailing Adeline's later life)

Boori Pryor *Maybe Tomorrow*

David Harris and Max Jones *A Man called Possum*

Roald Dahl *Boy*

Daryl Tonkin and Carolyn Landon *Jackson's Track*

Voice

Adeline Yen Mah's story is 'a life marked off on the soul by feelings, not by dates' (Helen Keller on biography). The book is a series of small windows into how Adeline was feeling at the time, how particular events affected her and marked her for life. Her voice comes through vividly in her writing, bringing to life each scene as she unveils to us the raw emotion she felt, her uncertainty and confusion.

Adeline describes tremendous lows, such as when her little duck is killed by the dog:

'I was overwhelmed with horror. My whole world turned desolate' (p.96),

and at the death of her grandfather (p.213) – she feels as if the world will end for her at these times. Similarly, less frequently, but no less eloquently, her highs are powerful and all encompassing. Upon hearing of her writing competition win, and finding her father pleased, Adeline felt:

'My whole being vibrated with all the joy in the world. I only had to stretch out my hand to reach the stars' (p.220)

As a result of this glorious win Adeline's father agrees to send her to University in England to study medicine, though she would prefer literature. To her:

'Does it matter what you do after you get to heaven?' (p.220)

She quotes Wordsworth to describe her feelings:

'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive' (p.221)

The descriptions of Adeline's powerful highs and lows capture her voice most effectively. Simple, straightforward description, the power of her writing lies in the depth of feeling in her most extreme moments. This, set against an almost monastic life of study and emotional deprivation gives to the book an extraordinary force and uncommon insight of great strength.

Characters

The characters in any autobiography are seen through the eyes of, or given to us, by the author. As with narrative, they are 'created' for us by the author, who subjectively chooses what to include and what to leave out.

- Do you think we can be given honest portrayals of characters in this way?
- Can the author of an autobiography, or the author of fiction, manipulate the reader to have them see things as they wish?
- Might the participants in the book see themselves, or their actions, differently from the view the author presents?
- How might Adeline's relatives describe themselves if given the chance to do so in their own life story?

Niang (Step mother)

Niang is a central character in Adeline's young life. A source of cruel and cold treatment for all of her step-children, she has a particular hatred for Adeline. Calculating and manipulative, though outwardly charming and stylish, Niang is the stereotypical evil stepmother. Whilst Adeline appears to crave the approval of her father, she senses this is not possible with Niang and only wishes to disappear in her presence.

- What does Adeline's physical description of Niang tell us about them both? (p.4)
- Why does Niang behave towards Adeline, and her other stepchildren, as she does?
- Reread Adeline's confrontation with Niang at the time of her friend's birthday party. (p.110 onwards) What does this tell you of Niang?

Father

Adeline's father is a mysterious character, aloof and seemingly untouchable. At times indulgent, at others cruel and uncaring, he is portrayed as ruled by his new wife's whims and having little regard for his elder children except when he may be able to bask in reflected glory. Adeline's only early memory of him is his pride at her having topped the class during her first week at school (p.11). This pattern of being noticed only for academic success is recurrent throughout the book.

Affluent, intelligent, business savvy and ambitious, Yen is thoughtless of others. Continually abandoning Adeline, ignoring the wishes of his own father, he appears to value only the opinion of his new wife Niang and chase success for himself based on wealth and power.

Of her father and Niang's reaction when she is saved from Communist China by an aunt, Adeline says:

'So far, they had not addressed me at all. Theirs was the gaze that glances but does not see.'
(p.167)

Brothers

Adeline's three older brothers are treated with marked difference to Niang's son within their father's household. Neglected and starved of affection, they survive due to the possibilities that they offer as 'sons' as opposed to Adeline, female and the apparent cause of her mother's death. Whilst the younger children, Adeline's half brother and sister, are allowed to wear modern western dress and eat special foods, the brothers are treated like ancient Chinese monks. Whilst their younger brother (fourth brother) has the latest page-boy haircut and a navy jacket with matching trousers, they endure shaved heads and traditional high collared robes. (p.102)

- Why are Adeline's brothers treated in this way?
- At one point, Adeline feels close to her third brother. Any bonds, however, are broken by the segregated nature of their family life and Adeline's placements in boarding schools. Why is this relationship difficult and changeable?

Big Sister (Lydia)

The view we have of Adeline's older sister is only fleeting. She is portrayed as both manipulative and manipulated, prepared to beg and obey for the trifles she wishes to have (tram fare p.47). For most of the novel she is symbolic of the arranged marriage that Adeline wishes desperately to avoid for herself.

'I'm terrified they'll force me into an arranged marriage like Big Sister's just to be rid of me.' (p.206)

In her dealings with Niang involving the jade necklace (p.104) Adeline's big sister is shown as weak and unable to help anyone except for herself. She too, craves acceptance as do the other children within the family.

Aunt Baba

Aunt Baba is a fascinating, impenetrable character, unmarried and hard working she should perhaps be a figure of power in Adeline's life, but this is not so. Partly this is cultural, as in Chinese society at this time an unmarried older Aunt must bow to the wishes of the male head of household. Adeline describes the circumstances that lead to her closeness to Aunt Baba, 'ordered to take care of me' (p.5) Though she is a comfort and support, and there is obvious affection between them, Aunt Baba is unable to affect what happens in Adeline's life.

Aunt Baba puts great faith in Adeline's intellectual abilities and praises all of her academic efforts, often being the only one to recognise and celebrate her achievements. It is Aunt Baba who reverently saves all of Adeline's reports and commendations.

- What does Aunt Baba's letter to Adeline (p.222) tell you about Aunt Baba and her place in the family?
- Why do you think Aunt Baba doesn't do more to 'rescue' Adeline?
- Why does Aunt Baba stay in China?

Ye Ye (Grandfather)

Adeline's grandfather is one of her most fervent supporters. Towards the end of the book, when Adeline is bemoaning her possible fate at the whim of her parents, he says:

'You mustn't talk like that! You have your whole life ahead of you. Everything is possible! I've tried to tell you over and over that far from being garbage, you are precious and special. Being top of your class merely confirms this. But you can vanquish the demons only when you yourself are convinced of your own worth.' (p.207)

Earlier, grandfather tells Aunt Baba to be supportive of Adeline. He says:

'Don't criticize her or tear her down. I don't want her to grow up like Big sister. She is going to be different!' (p.122)

Adeline credits her grandfather's support with enabling her to succeed. She says:

'And if I should be so lucky as to succeed one day, it'll be because you believed in me.' (p.208)

Despite his encouragement and support Adeline's grandfather is unable to give her any truly constructive help in her struggles. Though we are not aware of what he may have done away from Adeline's sight, perhaps he did remonstrate with Adeline's father over his treatment of his older children. Certainly Adeline cannot understand how her grandfather has been made to feel dependent, answering to his daughter-in-law for money. (p.42)

Through the eyes of Adeline we see that her grandfather tries to alleviate some of what she, and her older siblings, suffer, but he is powerless to do much. Upon seeing him after her time in St Joseph's convent, Ye Ye has changed, grown older. Adeline realises then that he has 'given up,' there was 'defeat' in his eyes. (p.168)

- Why is Ye Ye unable to offer Adeline more constructive support?
- Why does he 'give up', and what is it that he 'gives up'?

Lifestyle

Though obviously neglected and deprived in some senses, Adeline is part of an affluent family.

- What would her existence have been like as an unwanted daughter of a destitute family?

As Adeline enters the Peninsula hotel with Niang she sees a girl for sale (p.181). Earlier, she describes how:

'I had seen infants wrapped in newspapers left to die in doorways. Beggar-children in rags routinely rummaged the garbage-cans searching for food' (p.131)

- How does this deprivation and despair compare with Adeline's own life?
- How are they the same, yet also different?
- The beggar children are desperately poor but may be loved. Can you contrast this with the life Adeline leads?
- Food, pets, school work, friends and relatives all play an important role in Adeline's young life, not unlike the life of any young person. How do her experiences and her lifestyle contrast with the same areas of life for a student living in Australia in the year 2002?

Culture

- As an 'unwanted daughter', Adeline is almost a pariah in Chinese culture. Are there similarities between this and other cultures you are aware of?
- Food, spiritual beliefs (Nai Nai's funeral p.22), language and writing (p.171) are important parts of any culture. How are they part of Adeline and her families lives?
- What differences do you see between the Chinese culture of Adeline's grandfather Ye Ye, and the views and culture of Adeline's parents?
- Consider the photograph in the book of Ye Ye with that of Adeline's parents. (between pages 92 and 93). Read the description of the Shanghai streets (p.31). How does this compare with Adeline's descriptions of Niang and her implied lifestyle?
- Nai Nai, Ye Ye's wife, has had her feet bound as a child (p.7 and p.20). This 'custom' is part of another time. Culturally, the world of Adeline and that of her grandparents is very different. From Adeline's story what can you see that has changed and what has stayed the same?
- Can you see similar changes between your generation and that of your own grandparents?
- Was change in Adeline's world happening quickly or slowly?
- What affected these changes?
- What does the term 'cultural revolution' refer to in Chinese History?

Historical context

From page 138 Adeline describes, from a historical viewpoint, some of the background to the period through which she lived as a child. Though these events certainly affected her life and that of her family at the time, as political and social events they were not fully understood by the young Adeline.

Whilst Adeline is unceremoniously placed in a convent boarding school in Tianjin (p.142), the Communists, under their leader Mao Ze-Dong, are moving through China swiftly taking power. At the

very time when Adeline is placed in this convent, away from family and friends, the members of the population who can afford it, or are able, are fleeing China in droves. In only a short time Adeline finds herself the only student remaining in the convent (p.148) as everyone else has been collected or evacuated by their loved ones. It is only well-meaning relatives who, without consulting Adeline's parents, collect Adeline at the last minute (p.153).

- What might life have been like for Adeline if she had not been collected by Aunt Reine Schilling (p.154)?
- Do you think her parents were aware of her possible fate once they left at her at St Joseph's Convent?
- How does the historical context of war and conflict infiltrate the life of Adeline Yen Mah?
- Are you affected by the political or social context in which you live?

Self Esteem

On page 214 Adeline plays a game with her friends that contrasts her own destructive view of herself with the positive, affirming views of her held by her school friends.

In the game the students each write down what they see as their best physical, intellectual and social feature and this is compared with the views of the group. This is a game that, with care, could perhaps be played with students. Before beginning though group dynamics would have to be managed and rules clearly stated.

For Adeline and her friends the game is a positive and revealing experience as they come to realise that we each may see ourselves very differently from the way we are perceived. Adeline's self loathing is balanced against her friend's view that she is the one they think most likely to succeed, an affirming and encouraging response for her that may have encouraged her to continue in her struggle. The game could, if handled correctly, be an interesting activity for students.

The Chinese Cinderella story

Beginning on page 224 'The story of Ye Xian: the original Chinese Cinderella' is told in a letter to Adeline from Aunt Baba. For Aunt Baba Adeline is her Chinese Cinderella.

- How is Adeline a Chinese Cinderella?
 - How does it compare with the most well known Western, or 'Disney' versions of Cinderella?
 - Can you see similarities between the Cinderella story and other tales of fiction or nonfiction?
- The variations on this theme would be worthy of research.

Other cultures in Young Adult Fiction

Exploration of other cultures and the lives of others can lead to a better understanding of ourselves. There are many very good books that explore other cultures. The following list is only a selection – check your school library for others.

Suzanne Fisher Staples *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*

Brian Ridden *Sweet Tea*

Boori Pryor and Meme Mc Donald *Njunjil the Sun*

Ron Bunney *The Hidden*

An Na A *Step from Heaven*

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli *Tapestry*

Henning Mankell *Secrets in the Fire*

Kierin Meehan *Hannah's Winter*

Ji Li Jiang *Red Scarf Girl*

Christobel Mattingley *No Gun for Asmir* (and sequels)

Allan Baillie *Little Brother*

Allan Baillie *The China Coin*

Joseph Vondra *No-name Bird*