

Your books focus significantly on the function of memory in human experience, which is something that museums also deal with. What do you think is the role of museums when it comes to creating exhibits that are based, at least in part, on people's memories?

Whenever I go to a museum, it's as though I am there with the people who lived at that time. It's almost as though I entered a time machine, especially when I see very intimate, very intricate little details of their lives. I often take those details and put them in my books. It may not be specifically the same detail I saw at the museum, but it triggers in me an element of memory, which, as you said, is what my fiction is often about.

Is there any specific museum experience that has triggered that sort of experience for you, where you have seen something in an exhibit and then put it in some way into one of your books?

It's hard for me to think of a specific trigger, but museums have figured into my books. If you look at *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, for example, there is a scene that is actually set in the Asian Art Museum, and there's a lot about excavating memory. I suppose in a larger sense, that whole story is about the excavation of memories. In the book, there are references that are historically significant to the rest of the world—one being the excavation in China of what was called Peking Man (which I like to think of as Peking Woman, because the first piece that was excavated was from the skullcap of a woman).

As I go through museums, there are so many surprising things. For example, I went recently to the National Gallery of Art, and they had an exhibit on armor ["The Art of Power: Royal Armor and Portraits from Imperial Spain"]. Armor, I have to say, never interested me, and I thought, "Oh, battles, wars . . ." But what I was shown there by Dodge Thompson, who's chief of exhibitions, is

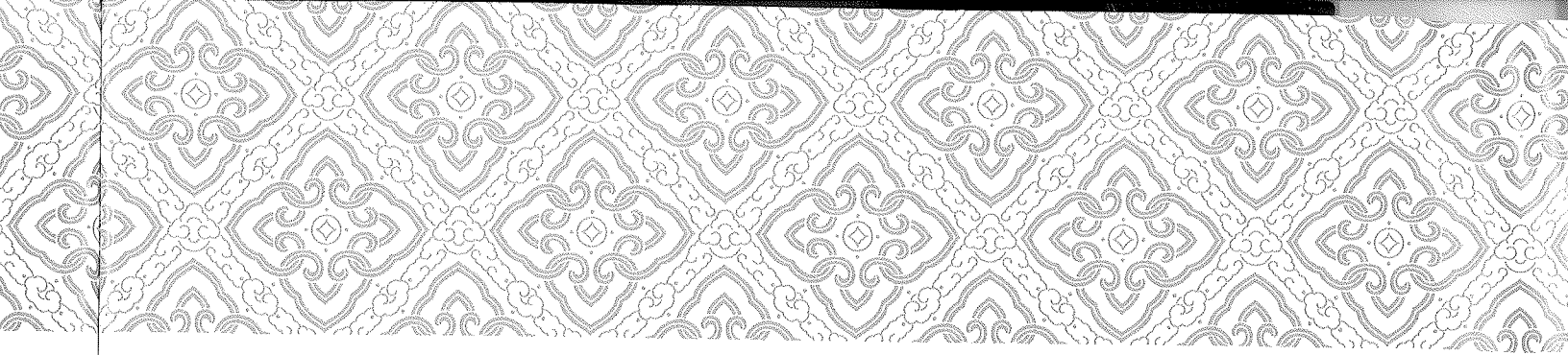
the symbolism represented in armor, the whole political system and the domination of one culture over another. Now, I may not write about armor, but looking at those elements—which seem at first glance to be decorative with no connecting sense of the time—I think to myself, "I'm going to include something like that, some little detail that portrays a much larger picture of the world."

In *Saving Fish From Drowning*, there's a funeral set at a museum. The book opens with a woman having her memorial service at what used to be the Asian Art Museum—when it was located in Golden Gate Park. Later, her spirit goes to Burma and China and is looking at things in a temple—a tribute to someone who has gotten merit for being a good Buddhist. Those details I got from being in a museum and talking to curators and other people.

Much of Chinese art is an amalgam, or layers of other cultures. They left the stamp of their culture, and then the next culture put theirs on top of it. The elements of other cultures remain, but the Chinese layer always emerges at the top. In Burma, I saw significant elements of the Buddha that I had never known about—the size of the earlobes and the placement of the hands, and also the sense of the half-closed lids and the eyes. So when I now look at a Buddha, I see these elements. These are things I might see now in another piece of art or in a person—traits that I then develop into memories of a particular person or particular time in my fiction.

Many characters in your books are often grappling specifically with the memory of tragedies in their past. How do you think that museums can handle these sorts of memories—for example, an exhibit about people's recollections of 9/11, or something similar?

I did see an exhibit about 9/11 recently at the Newseum in Washington, D.C. There were depictions, of course,



of the buildings, but the most moving aspect of the exhibit was the people—those who lost loved ones and the people who were themselves lost. It reminds us that we should never forget those people and their emotions and their loss. I happened to be in New York not far from Ground Zero, and I saw one of the towers fall. I was at some of the night memorials that were created immediately after. The exhibit brought back the overwhelming sadness of that time—the chaos, the confusion and the very real emotions. I think that needs to be there.

I happened to receive from one of the firemen a piece of fused glass from Ground Zero, and it's very special to me. It's in a special place, and when I look at it, it always strikes me as something very individual. I think of a particular person. An object like that in a museum carries with it not just a global history and its significance but the history of the individual who handled it. So museums, to me, are very intimate places.

*Your work has brought attention in this country to the experience of life in early to mid-20th-century China. How would you compare the ability of a work of fiction, such as you've written, and the ability of a museum to shed light on something that might otherwise be just a page in a history book?*

Well, I think they do similar things related to the importance of memory, the importance of history and the importance of a larger context—sometimes an almost mythic one. In both fiction and in museums, you get a sense of these mythic qualities, how these icons have remained with us and become a part of our lives, perhaps invisibly or unconsciously.

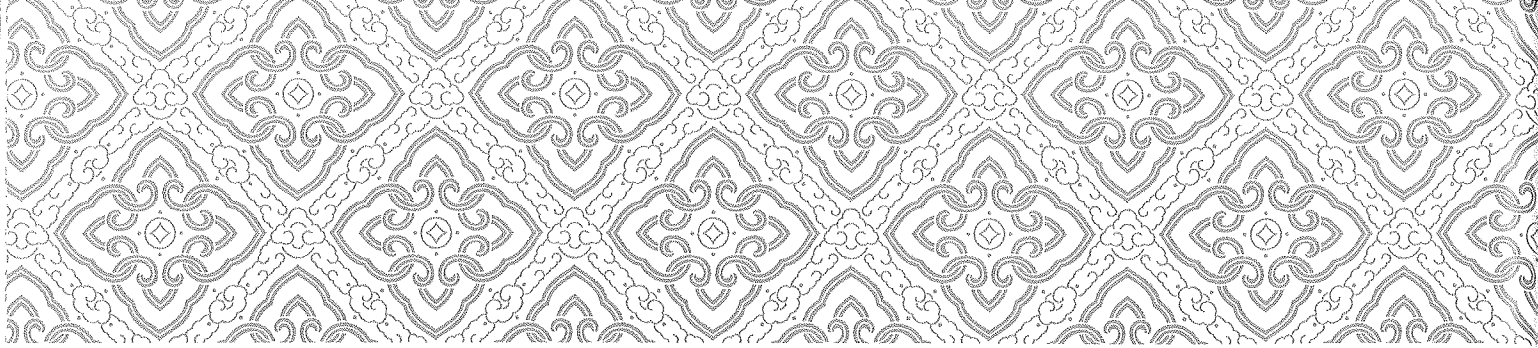
I went to a museum recently in Thailand that had to do with the loss of people who worked on the railroad between Burma and Thailand. What I wanted out of it was the emotional experience, and the museum was all about

that. It had diaries, woolen mittens somebody had knit while in a prison camp. Those are the kinds of artifacts that I want to put into my fiction as intimate memories. Most examples of memories in my books have to do with my mother's memories, because those have had an effect on my life. I did not recognize their source until much later, as she told me her memories, and I said, "Oh, that's where this trauma comes from, from this tragedy." "This is what happened during a period of war." "This is what happened because of the way the social system was at that time." So fiction and museums both provoke memories, taking people back in time, reminding people through the use of story or the experience of an exhibition. When people put together exhibitions, they're ~~creating~~ a whole world in a particular time. That's also what I want to do with my stories.

*How about the challenge of transmitting memories to children? From seeing *Sagwa* on PBS, I know you're interested in teaching children in this country about Chinese life and culture. What do you think is the key to engaging kids about history and lives that are different from their own?*

Make it personal. Children will watch a cartoon or read a book that is set in a different period of history and enjoy the experience. They're innately interested in history. But if you want to have a long-lasting effect, you need to make it personal—relate it to something that has affected their lives. If I said to a group of adolescents, "Look at this piece of history in a museum that has to do with Cambodia," they might say, "Well, that's nice, but I was born in this country. My parents are from there." They might not recognize that history is part of their own family. If they were given a personal memory of their parents, for instance, they could trace it back in time and say, "Oh—that's who I am. That's what shaped my family."

I didn't appreciate that when I was a kid. I didn't want



to know anything about history. I thought it was irrelevant, something in the past. Holocaust museums have visitors go through and take on the identities of real people to make the experience more personal. Something even more powerful would be to take on the identity of somebody in your own family, and focus on some tragedy they experienced. Tragedies are just so much more powerful than happy moments—weddings and all those things. Tragedies are as engraved as tombstones, and they get forgotten. You don't even remember the name of the person who was on the tombstone. I remember not finding out the name of my own grandmother—as well as the real name of my mother—until the day my mother died. I never knew when I was growing up who my grandmother was. I didn't want to know anything about the history of China. I didn't know China had a war. But the reason my family moved from one area of China to another was the direct result of that war, or revolution—the Taiping Rebellion. The war and what happened afterwards, the changeover to the Communists, was the reason my mother and father moved to the United States—because their family status was going to present a real problem for them.

The status of women in China during my grandmother's life contributed to her eventual suicide. I visited a historic site that is now government offices on an island called Chongming in Shanghai, and there I saw my grandmother's room where she died. It was deeply personal, and I started to cry. I felt—perhaps through the stories I've written—as though I could see her in there. You see many things like that in museums. They're not our own family histories, perhaps, but if you could walk a child through something like that, a tragedy, and say, "Imagine what happened in this room. . . ."

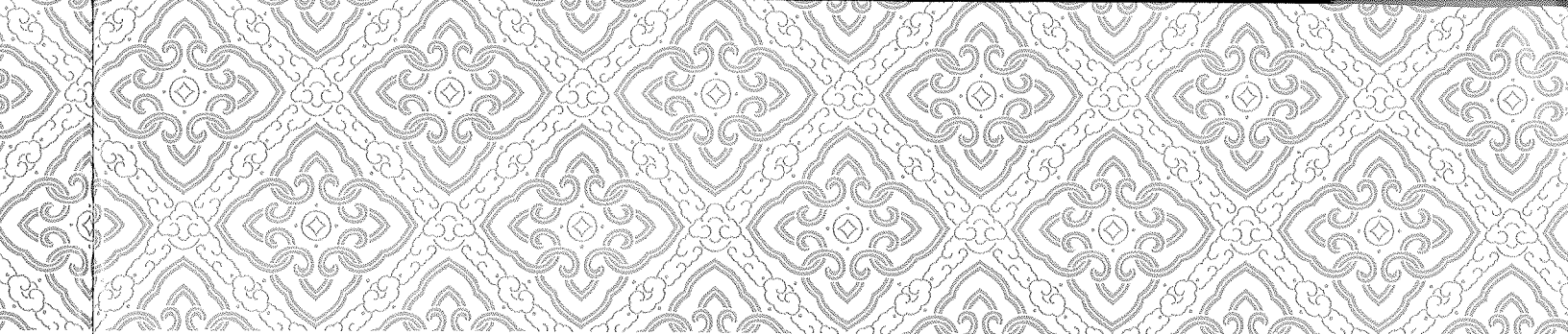
**What you're speaking of is certainly a challenge of the immigrant experience—people coming to this country from another one, and then trying to transmit, or not being able to transmit, in some cases, their memories to their children. Do you think that museums such as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum or Ellis Island do a decent job of portraying that immigrant experience? Do museums rise to that challenge?**

When my husband recently went to Ellis Island, he had the shivers when he saw his father's name there. I think they do. Ellis Island, of course, is the big one, but the Tenement Museum is one of my favorites. I've gone there three times. There are so many personal details there. So a child can be told, "You know what? Your great-great-grandparents, they lived in a place exactly like this." You can trace it. "Here's where they arrived. Here's where their name was inscribed." Sometimes you can see little details on, say, a sample visa, such as, "Checked for tuberculosis: No. Checked for worms: Yes." And they say, "Oh, my great-great-grandfather arrived with these worms and had to be treated before he could get off and go to the house." And I think if you can get a kid to get the shivers, that's what you want to do.

I went recently to the Museum of Chinese in America, just before it opened [in its new location], and it had pictures of people who were of great influence in the Chinese community in terms of immigration. I didn't know anything about them until I went to the museum and I saw how instrumental they had been.

**Do you think that Chinese Americans or Asian Americans, more generally speaking, are sufficiently well represented in American museums?**

We're starting to get museums like the Museum of Chinese in America and the China Institute, and the Asia Society often has exhibits. It's really changed a lot in my lifetime.



There are so many experiences of Chinese people who came to this country at different periods. There's a focus, oftentimes, on the Chinese in America starting around the 1800s. There's not as much about the Chinese who came post-1945, but the events of that time period represent a huge reason why people came to this country, and the reasons why Asians continue to come now.

**“Tragedies are as engraved as tombstones, and they get forgotten.”**

If you look at the history of Cambodia, you don't see much about the tragedies people experienced there. Their American-born kids or kids who came to the United States when they were very young don't know anything about it, because their parents never talk about this tragedy. There was a project that I was part of recently in which teenagers were asked to interview a parent, grandparent or other relative and ask them how they came to the United States and why. Often the stories were told in that person's native language. The kids listened to the stories and were shocked—they had never, ever known. One kid learned how his parents had to hide, where they hid, how the father ran through these fields, hoping he didn't step on something. He stepped on the head of somebody who'd been killed. He was running through the Killing Fields. This story was published in a book of about 30 such testimonies—each

of them compelling, each of them relating history that was oftentimes tragic. That's what made it personal to these kids. So maybe it takes something like this—talking to somebody from the older generation, especially if they've experienced a tragedy, or come through a war or experienced persecution—and then taking that personal experience, going to a museum and seeing how it relates to other things affecting a whole people.

*If you can think back to your experiences as a child, how do you think museums have transformed since then, especially in terms of their portrayal of Asian Americans?*

Most of the museums that I went to when I was a kid had to do solely with art, and it was Western art. I had this amazing experience of going to Europe, and it was a direct result of a family tragedy. My father and brother died, and my mother went a little crazy, and she decided we should leave and get as far away as possible. In Europe, I went to museums in many countries. I would stare at these Western paintings. There were no Chinese paintings. And so, to me, painting, art had to do with Western culture, or cultures from way, way back, cultures that really meant nothing to me. All I was staring at was the nature of the art itself, without a context. So different from how I see art now.

We didn't have the kinds of museums there are today. There weren't museums honoring events that happened in history, museums about Chinese people or Holocaust museums. There are so many very specific museums now that have to do with culture. Often they are smaller museums. They play a huge role in bringing together the whole tapestry of humankind. To keep art and culture alive, vibrant and relevant for people, museums should keep their exhibits personal. This is what very, very small museums do best. ●