



## Monkey King

By Patricia Chao  
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### Introduction

Sally Wang, the main character in Patricia Chao's first novel *Monkey King*, has just tried to kill herself as this story opens. Though the book takes the reader into moments of real suffering and sadness, ultimately this is not a sad story. Sally's journey is one of authentic growth and discovery. What she discovers is that memory has the power to heal, and that personal truth is the guide to happiness and sanity. Chao's narrative style rings with delicate observations, accurate details of family life, and compassion for the tangles of truth and lies, reality and dreams, failure and recovery, in which her characters live. She navigates this difficult terrain with wonderful intelligence, sensitivity, and humor.

The central figure in Sally's childhood is her father, who visits her room at night in the guise of the "Monkey King," a mythical figure from Chinese folklore. What takes place is a secret that the whole family wants to deny. Sally hates her father, but also has sympathy for him. She comes to understand herself in part through understanding him and the history that has made him who he is: a failed, bitter man filled with suppressed rage.

Sally's mother and sister, both witnesses to what happened to her as a child, are unable to live with their knowledge. They make different deals with reality and memory, and one of the things Sally learns is that one cannot always get the support of loved ones in coming to terms with the past. Chao has given us a sensitive and compassionate portrait of a family's suffering, and a young woman's victory over an abusive past.

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### Questions for Discussion

1. Early on in this novel, we learn that Sally has a history of cutting herself. "I had it down to an art, savoring the first sting of it, before my brain had time to distinguish pleasure from pain. Finally it would subside into something dull and predictable, a nasty little wound that I could have gotten by accident. Only a new cut would do the trick, give me that thrill again" (Page 15). What is it that might make self-inflicted pain feel like a release, or a relief from personal suffering? Is Sally punishing herself? Is she trying to make herself feel something, even if it is pain?
2. Sally's grandmother, Nai Nai, is an important figure in this story. In what ways is Nai Nai different from Sally's parents? What are some of the reasons for these differences? What kind of power does the gift of Nai Nai's jade hairpin hold for Sally?
3. When Sally is in the hospital, Douglas accuses her of being a fake. "You're made of plaster. You're not real," he says (Page 39). And later in the story, Sally thinks, "Douglas was right, my sister was right. I was a fake. I did things from my head, not from my heart. For all my sincerity I was the least honest person I knew" (Page 73). Is Sally right about herself? Is she an honest person? Why does she feel like a fake?
4. In the passage quoted above, Sally says that she is sincere but not honest. What is the difference between sincerity and honest? This story is in many ways about the boundary between truth and lies. What different kinds of lies, and different kinds of truths, do we see played out in Sally's family? How do Sally's mother and sister cope with their knowledge of the past? Are they sincere, but not honest?
5. Just as there are different versions of truth in this story, there are also different versions of sanity. Sally loses the ability to function in her life, while both of her parents are successful academics. Is sanity defined by one's ability to function well in society? What does this story tell us about the way our culture views sanity and what is considered normal?
6. What part does Sally's art play in her recovery? She loses the ability to paint while she is ill, but still sees the world in images, lines and colors. While at Willowridge she contemplates making ink drawings of the willow trees, but then thinks, "It was an audacious fantasy I was having, because I knew full well the absolute confidence it took to work in ink. You had to do it from your soul, and it had to be as natural as breathing" (Page 34). How does Sally recover this natural confidence in her art?
7. "So what I understand, is that you're not contemplating suicide anymore, but you're not exactly jumping up and down at the prospect of living either," Sally's therapist says (Page 38). Sally is, in many ways, between worlds. She's not quite sane and not quite crazy, not quite Chinese and not quite American, not able to be fully present in any of her realities. How does this in-between state of mind affect Sally's view of herself? How does she define herself in relation to other people? Is she able to trust her own point of view? How does she find her identity?
8. Sally and her sister Marty seemed locked into the roles of "good girl" and "bad girl." How do these roles serve them in the family? Do they each see themselves in these roles as ways of getting something they need from their parents? When Sally tries to talk to Marty about what their father did to her, Marty doesn't want to talk about it. She says, "I never understood why Daddy had a thing about you anyway ... You're not even that pretty" (Page 79). This of course reveals a deep misunderstanding. Why do Marty and her mother see Sally as her father's "favorite," when in fact she was his victim? What purpose does this version of the past serve?
9. When Sally's mother and sister come to group therapy at Willowridge, what happens is not healing through telling the truth, but a continuation of Sally's abuse, with the aim of preserving their personal versions of their "happy family." Sally's mother reminds her of her father's "sacrifice," and calls her a "no-good daughter," saying that she has disappointed her father. In what ways are her mother's viewpoints perhaps influenced by her Chinese upbringing? She goes on to say, "Children supposed to give you peace in old age. Your daddy was never peaceful. He talked this all the time, maybe he's better off back in China, shouldn't have come to the United States at all. Never have children." Sally responds by asking, "Why do you hate me so much?" And her mother says, "Love, hate, this is so American. You say I love you, what does this mean? Action is important, not words" (Page 85). In what ways is Sally's mother a product of Chinese culture, with its strong reliance on pride and honor, and in what ways is she a product of a family that perpetuates abuse? How do these two things overlap?
10. The character of Sally's father pervades this story like an invisible presence. He is a mystery, a "ghost" who haunts Sally, and continues to affect the lives of these three women even though he is dead. "Happiness precedes loss," says Sally, "This is the main lesson I have learned from my father" (Page 97). Do his disappointed hopes of being a physicist provide any way of understanding his behavior toward his daughters? How does he see his family?

11. What is it that allows Sally to trust Mel in a way that she was never able to trust her husband, Carey? Why is Sally able to relax in a sexual affair with Mel? During their first time together in Florida, Sally thinks, "I am swimming with the seals." This recalls her early childhood in California, when she swam with the seals and her father called her "Sealy," before the incest occurred. Why might she return to that time as a way of experiencing pleasure? What is it about her time in Florida that prepares her to embrace with her life again?
12. As the novel ends, Chao describes Sally's thoughts as she looks back at everything that's happened to her. "Three months ago I'd wanted to leave this world. In the hospital they told us that pain is something you experience and then put behind you. I disagree. I think you hold everything; pain and pleasure, in your heart, and that memory only deepens the next experience" (Page 307). Do you agree with this? Chao's storytelling style relies on memory, and in seeing the past in great detail. How does her use of detailed passages from the family's past affect your understanding of Sally's experience? Do you think Sally comes to terms with her past in a healthy way?

### **About the Author**

Patricia Chao was born in Monterey, California and spent most of her childhood in a suburb of New Haven, Connecticut. She graduated from Brown University with a degree in Semiotics (Poetry and Prose Writing) and worked in the People's Republic of China as a script editor for Radio Beijing. Subsequently she obtained a Master's in English (Fiction Writing) from New York University, where she studied with Mona Simpson and E.L. Doctorow. Her first novel, *Monkey King*, was published by HarperCollins in 1997 and was a Finalist for the Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Award. Her second novel, *Mambo Peligroso*, was published by HarperCollins in May 2005.

Patricia is the recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship as well as the New Voice Award for Poetry for her collection, *Breaking on Two*. She was a member of the dance performance troupe "Casa de la Salsa" and is a reviewer for *Global Rhythm* magazine. She lives in New York City.