

WHERE THE PAST BEGINS

Memory and Imagination

AMY TAN

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. *Where the Past Begins* is Amy Tan's memoir—she is the narrator and her motives are on full display. Do you identify with how she characterizes herself? Are there any moments in the story where you know you would have done something differently, had you been in her position?
2. In the introduction, Amy writes that if a memory is written it is altered by perspective and bias, and if a memory is photographed there is always the question of what context has been left out. Do you agree with her insights? How does this affect your interpretation of her memoir, which is comprised of writing and photographs?
3. Language plays a significant role in *Where the Past Begins*, especially in regards her mother's struggles with English as a second language. How does language serve as a link between Amy and her mother? What role does language play in your own life?
4. Much of the narrative is driven by the conflict between Amy and her mother, which is marked by her mother's mental illness. Are you able to understand the perspectives of both women? Why or why not? Do you think Amy looks at her mother more forgivingly in retrospect? Why?
5. In Chapter Nine, Amy describes participating in an educational program for early readers and children with high IQs. What is the context of this study? How did it affect her parents' expectations of her, and her expectations of herself?
6. Amy writes about her love of music and its ability to evoke stories in her imagination in Chapter Two. How does her experience compare to your own connection to music?
7. Amy's journal entries are inserted between the book's chapters, there are also two excerpts of fiction from her unfinished novels. Do any of these non-sequential passages stand out to you more than others? Why? How do you think this narrative structure reflects the themes of the book?
8. Amy loses first her older brother Peter, then her father, to brain tumors when she is in high school. How does grief affect her, both in the short- and long-term?
9. Amy only knows bits of information about her grandmother's life, but at one point she rediscovers photos of her grandmother dressed in the uniform of a Shanghai courtesan. Does this revelation affect her interpretation of her family's history? Do you believe that family secrets are sometimes necessary? What are the dangers of keeping them?
10. Throughout the book, Amy attributes her innate curiosity and tendency to invent stories to fill the gaps in real-life information to her drive to write fiction. Do you have the same impulse in your life? Do you agree with her insight that creativity is vital to finding meaning in life?

