



Award Winning Writer

Name in English: Gish Jen
Name in Chinese: 任碧蓮 [任碧蓮]
Name in Pinyin: Rèn Bìlián
Gender: Female
Birth Year: 1955
Birth Place: Long Island, New York
Current location: Cambridge, Massachusetts

Profession(s): Writer, Novelist

Education: B.A., English, Harvard, 1977; M.F.A.; University of Iowa, 1983; Iowa Writers Workshop; Jen was also a business student at Stanford University from 1979-1980.

Awards: Gish Jen received the *Transatlantic Review* award (Henfield Foundation) in 1983. The LA Times named her novel, *Mona in the Promise Land*, one of the top 10 books of 1996. Jen has also received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment of the Arts. She has also been honored as Writer-in Residence at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and was granted a Fulbright Fellowship to travel to Beijing. Jen was the recipient of the Lannan Award for Fiction and the Strauss Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Contribution (s): Gish Jen is a second generation Chinese-American. Her parents immigrated separately to America from China in the 1940s. Her mother, Agnes, was sent to graduate school in America, a common experience of upper class Chinese girls of that time period to add the prestige of an American education to their accomplishments, even when such an education was never meant to be used. Her father, Norman Jen, a hydraulic engineer, was brought to America to help in planning a Shanghai front against the Japanese in World War II. Because travel across the Pacific was considered too risky he was flown from China, over the Himalayas to India, then from there to Europe and then to America. By the time he arrived in America the war was already over and he decided to stay for graduate school. Plans to return to China ended with the communist takeover in 1949. Despite the desire of many of the graduate students to rejoin their families in China, a deal was made between the Nationalist Chinese and the United States to keep them in the US to prevent the graduates and students from helping the communists. They were offered US citizenship as refugees. Gish Jen's father was one that refused to accept the deal saying that he wasn't a refugee. He spent many years as a man without a country as a result.

Gish Jen was named after the early American film actress Lillian Gish. She spent her early childhood in Yonkers, New York. As the only Chinese family in a poor neighborhood they faced a lot of discrimination. Rocks were thrown at them and her brother was beaten so often that he was enrolled in judo school for self-protection.

Later the family moved to the upscale neighborhood of Scarsdale where the population was 40% Jewish and much more accepting of minorities.

Her decision to drop out of Stanford Business School and become a writer horrified her parents. Her father said, "You have to have a meal ticket. If you don't have a meal ticket your husband will treat you badly." Her mother refused to talk to her for almost a year and Jen was cutoff financially. They were only reconciled when she married her husband, a Harvard and Stanford Business School graduate, which more than made up for him being Irish American. Her success as a writer though only became real to her parents in 1991 when her first novel, *Typical American*, was mentioned in the Chinese language newspaper, World Journal.

Jen's provocative works such as *Typical American* in 1991 and *Mona in the Promised Land*, published in 1996, brought fresh perspective in identifying and confronting cultural differences through writing. Both of these novels tackled difficult topics such as cultural diversity and ethnic identity. She said, "Part of my writing has been an effort to claim my American-ness in a way that does not deny my Chinese heritage." Subsequent novels and writing have also boldly dealt with the search for one's cultural identity, and themes of immigration and assimilation for both Chinese Americans and other ethnic groups.

She has also been published in The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, The New Republic, The Los Angeles Times, and The New York Times.

Jen has also spent time at Tufts University as a Lecturer in fiction writing, and as a visiting writer at the University of Massachusetts.

Publications/Patents:

Typical American. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

Nimrod Awards XIV: Making Language, 1993

Mona in the Promised Land. New York, Knopf, 1996

Who's Irish?: Stories. New York, Knopf, 1999.

Ploughshares Fall 2000: Fiction Issue, 2000.

The Love Wife, 2004.

Residente Permanente, 2004

External Links:

<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4465/Jen-Gish.html>

<http://www.powells.com/authors/jen.html>

http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/ap_pjourneys_transcript1.html