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But Will It All Make 'Tiger Mom' Happy?

By JANET MASLIN

BATTLE HYMN OF THE TIGER MOTHER

By Amy Chua

Illustrated. 237 pages. The Penguin Press. \$25.95.

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“There are all these new books out there portraying Asian mothers as scheming, callous, overdriven people indifferent to their kids’ true interests,” Amy Chua writes. She ought to know, because hers is the big one: “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” a diabolically well-packaged, highly readable screed ostensibly about the art of obsessive parenting. In truth, Ms. Chua’s memoir is about one little narcissist’s book-length search for happiness. And for all its quotable outbursts from Mama Grisly (the nickname was inevitable), it will gratify the same people who made a hit out of the granola-hearted

[“Eat, Pray, Love.”](#)

You might wonder how this is possible. In “Eat, Pray, Love,” Elizabeth Gilbert presented herself as a seeker of solace, whereas Ms. Chua eagerly overacts the role of wicked witch. The litany of her outrages has made her an [instant conversation piece](#). What kind of mother throws her 3-year-old out in the cold? (“You can’t stay in the house if you don’t listen to Mommy.”) Or complains that her family’s pet rabbits aren’t smart enough? (“They were unintelligent and not at all what they claimed to be.”) Or, most memorably, makes her two daughters’ music lessons so grueling that one girl leaves tooth marks on the piano?

Ms. Chua claims that this is the essence of tough Chinese parenting, as opposed to the lax Western kind. And already her book has a talking point: What does she mean by Chinese and Western? She is of Chinese descent, but she grew up in the American Midwest. (“How I wished I could have a bologna sandwich like everyone else!”) She became a law professor and now teaches at Yale. She and her husband, another Yale law professor, hired a Chinese nanny to speak Mandarin, though Ms. Chua doesn’t speak it herself. Ms. Chua grew up as a Roman Catholic, but her daughters were

raised as Jews.

So she admits to using the term “Chinese mother” loosely — so loosely that even “a supersuccessful white guy from South Dakota (you’ve seen him on television)” told her his working-class father was a Chinese mom. (The book carries an “it will leave you breathless” blurb from South Dakota’s own Tom Brokaw.) And what she uses “Chinese mother” to mean is this: driven, snobbish and hellbent on raising certifiably Grade A children. Ms. Chua contrasts these attitudes with the sappy “Western” ones that can be found in Disney movies, where a mere romp in the ocean can be construed as a happy ending.

“That’s just Disney’s way of appealing to all the people who never win any prizes,” she says.

Ms. Chua was not about to raise prizeless slackers. She wanted prodigies, even if it meant nonstop, punishing labor. So “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” chronicles its author’s constant demanding, wheedling, scolding and screaming. It describes seemingly endless piano and violin sessions that Ms. Chua supervised. (Her own schedule of teaching, traveling, writing and dealing with her students goes mostly unmentioned — and would require her to put in a 50-hour workday.) And it enforces a single guiding principle that is more reasonable than all the yelling suggests: “What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you’re good at it.”

If this were the entirety of “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” this book would not be destined for major best sellerdom. But Ms. Chua’s story has been shaped according to a familiar narrative arc, the one that ensures that her comeuppance will occur, that her children will prove wiser than she and that other not-all-that-far-from-Disney things will happen. When it’s time to fess up to shortcomings (“the truth is I’m not good at enjoying life”) and smell the roses at the end of the book, Ms. Chua deploys her sister’s illness to provide the necessary dose of *carpe diem*.

Wherever she is in this slickly well-shaped story, Ms. Chua never fails to make herself its center of attention. When her older daughter, Sophia, was a baby, “she basically slept, ate *and watched me have writer’s block* until she was a year old.” (The italics here are mine.) “Sophia,” she later explains, “you’re just like I was in my family.” When she pitches what’s already become her most notorious fit over the girls’ amateurishly made birthday cards, Ms. Chua declares, “I spend *half my salary* on stupid sticker and eraser party favors” for their birthdays, adding “*I deserve better than this.*” And when Jed fails to honor Ms. Chua’s birthday with reservations at a

good enough restaurant, and the family ends up at a so-so one, he too is in hot water.

Jed? Yes, Jed. Ms. Chua's husband plays a large role in this story, even if he is made to sound like her hapless foil. He is presented as a handsome, charming and amazingly patient man, especially since his mother and wife had some similar traits. (His mother, according to the book, was once "aghast" at the cheeses Ms. Chua chose for a party and demanded better ones.) Jed is the fixture without which Ms. Chua's book would not be possible. And he is often wrong, wrong, wrong about child rearing, which means that the reader will think he is right.

Jed happens to be Jed Rubenfeld, a novelist as well as a lawyer. His first book, a richly textured historical thriller, "[The Interpretation of Murder](#)," was published in 2006. When Ms. Chua runs up expenses for extra music lessons in "Tiger Mother," Jed is quoted as saying, "I'd better start on a sequel now."

That sequel, "The Death Instinct," is about to come out. It lacks the sensationalism to rise as high on the charts as Ms. Chua's book, but it's a well-executed work of escapism and an emphatically good read. Set in the post-World War I era, it has a notably smart, well-educated heroine and features Sigmund Freud as a character. For reasons about which "Tiger Mother" readers can speculate, Mr. Rubenfeld sends Freud delving into the causes of shell shock.