**Q&A** From the official Gish Jen website

Q: How did you get the nickname Gish?

A: I got the nickname Gish when I was in high school. My friends  
and I were in an arty phase. We were no longer seeing regular movies; instead we were going into New York City to see “films.”

And as part of this transformation, some of us acquired nicknames. A friend whose last name was Hausman was called “A.E.,” after the poet. And because my given name was Lillian, I was called Gish, after the silent screen actress, Lillian Gish.

At the time, I was not aware that Lillian Gish had appeared in that racist movie, “The Birth of a Nation.” In truth, I barely knew who she was. Still, I accepted my name because it was fun and because I liked the way it sounded. Anyway, it was a name that only a few people used under fairly specialized circumstances.

That was until I went on a National Science Foundation archaeological dig for the summer. There I was, far away from home and, that first day, in a slightly weird situation. The building had just been hit by lightning; the electricity was out; my fellow campers and I were going around a circle introducing ourselves by candlelight. And for some reason, when they got to me, with no premeditation, I introduced myself as “Gish Jen.”

Today I realize that that was probably the first sign that I was going to be a writer – that act of self-naming. But at the time I was just having fun. “Gish” did all sorts of things that “Lillian” would never do. “Lillian” was a nice Chinese girl. “Gish” was, shall we say, less well behaved.

Q: Were your parents immigrants?

A: Yes. My parents came from China in the 1940′s. My father came as part of the war effort. Back toward the end of the war, there was talk about opening a second front against the Japanese, in the Shanghai harbor. And as people were needed to help coordinate that, and as my father was a hydraulics engineer, hewas sent to the U.S.

My mother came under the sponsorship of a church group. She thought she might get a degree and go back and do something big, like become minister of education. Instead, like my father, she got caught here by the Chinese Revolution in 1949.

Q: Is that why you write?

A: Everyone wants the world to cohere in some meaningful fashion. For people growing up, as I did, between cultures, though, that desire can burn in a way particularly well suited for fiction. Faulkner once said that fiction is about the “human heart in conflict with itself. ”I grew up with just such a heart.

Q: A heart in conflict with itself, you mean.

A: Yes.

Q: Does that mean you write about the immigrant experience?

A: It means that I write about but alsoout of the immigrant experience.Igrew up, not just with a desire to tell my own story, or my family’s story, but fascinated in general by culture and cultural change – by ways of seeing and speaking, and not seeing and not speaking, by family making and unmaking.

Q: What about individualism?

A: I’m fascinated by individualism – what the psychologists call independence — and by its opposite, collectivism, which the psychologists call interdependence. I’m fascinated by the different selves we can have, sometimes at the same time – individualistic selves that value the truth within, and collectivist selves that derive meaning from belonging, and service to a higher cause.

Q: It’s a fascination that figures large in TIGER WRITING.

A: Exactly

Q: Though your new book is not just about the different selves, but also about how those selves affect artistic expression and artistic values, and especially how it shapes the novel.

A: Yes.

Q: You really changed how I saw Kafka, and Orhan Pamuk, and Milan Kundera.

A: Thank you.

Q: What keeps you going?

A: Seamus Heaney once said that poetry is steadying, and I think that’s true of fiction, too. I think people see things in it – things about the world, things about themselves – that help keep them in touch with something important. Fiction helps open a little gap between people and the culture around them such that they can embrace what they like and reject what they don’t. And I find it sustaining to contribute to that process. My publisher sent an early galley of TIGER WRITING to Maxine Hong Kingston, who wrote back right away to say that the book is about her – that it explained her to herself. And I’ve had other people say things like that to me, too – that their whole lives were about wanting to be Hattie Kong in WORLD AND TOWN, or that they were Mona Chang in MONA IN THE PROMISED LAND, or that Mama Wong in THE LOVE WIFE was their mother-in-law. The poet Philip Levine once told me that, reading my work, he felt as if I had been watching the Levine family movies.

Q: Though the reader learns so much about other people, too, in your work.

A: I do hope so. Fiction is about recognition, but it is also about enlargement — about empathy and adventure. It’s a privileged look into other people’s hearts and thoughts and worlds.

Q: You write in so many different voices, and from so many different points of view.

A: It’s one of the gifts of being an Asian American female. I was brought up to listen to other people’s voices more than to my own, to intuit their moods and feelings, to see things from their perspective.

Q: And yet you are known for your singular vision, particularly of America.

A: I have attended to America in much the way that I have attended to other’s people’s voices, and I have seen it in the way that a person can if she is slightly estranged from it — if things that read as “normal” to many don’t read that way to her. America was news to my family and me when I was growing up, and in many ways still is.

Q: So is the work about you, too?

A: Yes. I might not always be using the stuff of my life – what really did happen to me yesterday at the grocery store and so on. In fact, I rarely am. But the preoccupations are mine, even if the characters and situations change. They are like a certain quality of light, a light that brings out a certain level of detail, and confers a certain aura.

Q: So you sign everything you write, as they say.

A: I suppose I do, yes. I can’t help it.