



The Eighth Promise: An American Son's Tribute to His Toisanese Mother

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In the best-selling tradition of *The Color of Water* comes a beautifully written, evocative memoir of a relationship between a mother and son—and the Chinese-American experience

In *The Eighth Promise*, author William Poy Lee gives us a rare view of the Asian-American experience from a mother-son perspective. His moving and complex story of growing up in the housing projects of San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1960s and '70s unfolds in two voices—the author's own and that of his mother—to provide a sense of tradition and culture. It is a stunning tale of murder, injustice, fortitude, and survival. Already, this exquisitely wrought memoir is garnering rave notices.

The Eighth Promise: An American Son's Tribute to His Toisanese Mother Details

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Chalida says

I agree with Marie. What a great book about a Toisanese family. I love the interweaving of the mother's recipes for soups with growing up in the tumultuous 60's. Since my mom's family has been in California since the 1890's, it was great reading what I felt was a bit of her and her siblings' and cousins' history coming of age in SF.

Alana lowe says

it's about a toisan family, the parents from southern china and the kids grow up in the 60s-70s in SF chinatown. The older son wrote the book and he interviewed his mother, so every other chapter is in her voice. Pretty great to hear both and recognize some of the ways the mother coped with life in America over the years and passed traditions on to her sons. still reading it...

Rosemary says

To another person with family roots in Toisan, this was a moving book, offering insights on the immigrant experience, the assimilation process for Chinese in America, on Chinese parenting. It's a good reminder on how unjust White America once was not that long ago and a fascinating look at San Francisco Chinatown from the inside.

tbears says

My family also moved into the North Ping Yuen projects when they were brand new and moved out in 1969 to live the American dream of home ownership. I also attended Nam Kue Chinese school but years later. It excited me to read these similarities growing up in Chinatown. My parents were from villages in nearby counties to Toisan.

Being younger than Lee and female, I think I led a very sheltered life and didn't pay too much attention to the violent Chinese gang crimes in Chinatown. I was aware of them and was warned by my mom that they were bad seeds that were to be avoided by all means. This part of the book was disturbing to me. While this was an important part of Lee's life, I agreed with his mother that it wasn't good to relive the sorrows from the past. I didn't realize the final third part of the book was going to be more of a tribute to his younger brother's trial and prison life instead of his Toisanese mother.

The alternating chapters with his mom's voice were the most interesting. The author's chapters were often repetitive but contained quite a deal of Chinatown history. Still I often found myself wanting to get through his chapters so I can read more of his mother's anecdotes. His mother is one fascinating and wise woman!

I didn't like that this book lacked photos, a family tree and a map of Toisan.

I would recommend this book to anyone who grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown.

Flora says

I was skeptical when I first met William Poy Lee and heard him speak about his book. In fact, I wasn't even willing to put money on it; I went the library route. Another Chinese-American memoir? And with a title like that? But Mr. Lee writes cleanly and simply about two extraordinary lives -- his and his mother's -- skipping the mystical hoo-hah and emphasizing the American experience. His optimism truly shines through and is truly refreshing, especially when so many other Chinese-American authors are about angst, angst and surviving despair-filled lives.

Gale says

Ann Arbor Reads selection for 2008, a facinating view of Chinese-American life in San Francisco, a mixing of cultures, and a very different way of looking at the world. The author spoke about his book and his philosophy here in Ann Arbor, introduced his elderly mother to the audience, and filled us in with details about the Lee family since the end of the book. An excellent writer and speaker, I have high expectations for his next book (already in progress).

Beth says

A great story about one man and his mother - Chinese-Americans who fought to keep their culture and themselves in San Francisco after WWII. The story tells the triumphs and troubles of each generation, with heavy emphasis on the civil rights movement for Chinese-Americans that few probably know. A great story of family strength that exudes the unique culture so many new Americans have to share with their new home country.

Rebecca robinson says

I found this book so fascinating! I loved the Chinese history (I studied Chinese in college so it had extra meaning to me). I also loved the San Francisco history which many times the Chinese are left out of. My favorite sections were when his mother and the other village women were being discussed. Those women had it figured out, and it left me longing for a return to the old village ways where every woman was considered a sister who was of high importance.

Karen says

I was interested in the book because my boyfriend's mom is from Toisan and I thought this would be a great

way to learn more about her and where she came from. The book is a quick read and it is interesting to learn about all the experiences of the author, his mom, and the whole family. I did feel that certain points in the book were repeated too much but it has the makings of a good read.

Marie Hew says

If you come from a Toisanese family, the themes of compassion and kindness are undeniably familiar. This is the first book I have EVER read by any Chinese American author that has been able to capture the essence of Toisanese culture, language, values and our way of being. I don't know why it took so long for a book like this to be published considering a huge percentage of Chinese in San Francisco are Toisanese or descendants of immigrants from Toisan.

Lee beautifully weaves together the story of his youth in San Francisco together with that of his mother's. He's able to bring to life the tumultuous times of the late 1960s and 1970s American with that of his own efforts to fight for civil rights for the residents of San Francisco's insular Chinatown. Meanwhile, Lee aptly blends together the depth of his mother's values, struggles and triumphs of a woman and mother who successfully maintains her millennia-old values and practices and translates them for her children in an Toisanese-American context.

Sharon says

As a Canadian Born Chinese, I found the bits about the values and life in village of Toisan fascinating. Unfortunately the majority of the rest of the book just wasn't as interesting to me and if weren't for the the fact that I, myself, am Toisanese (which was why I picked up this book in the first place), I probably would not have forced myself to finish reading it.

Lormac says

This was a fascinating book. The author's style is not very polished, and I would have liked to have heard more about his young adult life which is given little attention compared to his childhood. But somehow all of this just makes the story of life with his mother more poignant. Another book club suggestion which I never would have picked up on my own.

Shirley Lin says

I heard author William Poy Lee speak about Tibet's recent unrest at a US-China Friendship program in August 2014 and purchase a copy of his 2007 memoir afterward. I had little expectations of good writing and an interesting story, but the book succeeds with both. This tale of a son of San Francisco Chinese immigrants from Toisan Canton China is written with honesty, a keen intelligence. The book serves as an excellent backdrop of the growing into adulthood of a young Chinese American activist in San Francisco through the

1960s to 1980s and beyond. Interwoven are the narrative of the author's immigrant mother side-by-side. Mrs. Lee epitomizes the strong, nurturing, itinerant mother imbued with a rich family cultural heritage that she passes on to her children and others in her care. The author is adept at explaining the centuries long discrimination against Chinese immigrants whose sacrifices and forbearance allowed the next generation to work more boldly for equal rights in American society. A good read. Recommended.

Melissa says

In keeping with "The Namesake" this non-fiction book explores the challenges faced by first generation immigrants. Keeping and respecting the old traditions, while immersing yourself in a new culture is quite a challenge.

This book is the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti Reads selection for this year and will be discussed in groups next year.

Carol says

An Asian American odyssey with an edge, this tale is told in the alternating voices of a Chinese American son and his mother from Toisan County, Guangzhou, southern China. The Bay Area family embraces the toughness of their new life in America with a certain innocence and brash naiveté, until reality hits in an explosion of violence and systemic betrayal. William, his mother and his brother fight for their family's moral survival in the face of overwhelming odds, overcome their obstacles, and still manage to retain faith in their adopted country by staying true to their cultural values -- and by keeping the "Eighth Promise." Growing up as a Chinese American girl outside of Chinatown, I was only vaguely aware of the radical struggles going on in our community. But my aunt was the director of the Ping Yuen housing project, and I remember going there many times to visit her. It was valuable and often inspirational to be taken inside this world, and to follow this family's tough journey of assimilation, so different from my own.
