

# Asian-american cultural and personal struggle with identity in, eating chinese fo...

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The initial disappointment could start with the deceptive title - if your expectations bordered at oriental food-fetish erotica. Then, perhaps doubled if you had braced yourself for an Amy Tan experience (Ref: Joy Luck Club, etc). I take this opportunity to warn you against both expectations, but do give this book a chance if your unrefined literary tastes embark on occasional flirtations with lab rats - it appears to be an (experimental?) acquired taste. Our protagonist Ruby Lee finds herself broke and jobless one summer, and reluctantly resigned herself to staying with her parents in Queens behind their laundry shop. Her parents accept her prodigal return with unspoken but obvious disappointment while her siblings exhibit a degree of indifference. Now, forced to return to an identity and a family she tried escaping from, she provokes friction and threatens the seeming calmness her family adopted in her absence. While that might not seem like much of a plot, Mei also weaved into this journey several contemplative bits that I could relate to personally, especially Ruby's frustration and restlessness in being unemployed and temping. Reading certain paragraphs proved to be a test of patience. I sunk into a listless desperation, hating the repetitive rambling and restlessness that almost echoed my own. I sought brief consolation when Mei sneaked brief respite from the protagonist's narration with insightful monologues and historical recounting from Ruby's parents, siblings, and boyfriend. The struggles and dilemmas are quite common of all relationship dynamics. One worth mentioning would be her brief break up with her boyfriend following a hesitated encounter with a lesbian - perhaps worthy of comparison with a scene from Saving Face (Alice Wu). While Mei's approach and storyline is somewhat similar to Amy's (although not at par

with Amy's fluidity or eloquence), she has an engaging (if inconsistent, argh!) writing style of her own. Admittedly, Mei Ng's debut effort certainly proves that she has much potential. But it is unfortunate that this experience left a very tart and irritable sting on my palate - I should have hesitated three times before picking (yet) another novel on the asian-american cultural/personal struggle with identity/family/etc. A friend wondered aloud if it were a curse: that contemporary Asian (English language) writers of oriental ethnicity cannot escape writing a novel without adopting formulaic Amy-Tan plots? We hope that our wait is worth the bated breath for someone to prove it otherwise. (I have meanwhile invested in another comb of bananas to replenish my diminished stock of serotonin. )