

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



I Love a Broad
Margin To My Life

Maxine Hong Kingston

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About the Book

Maxine Hong Kingston, author of such seminal works as *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, is one of the most important American writers of her generation. In this remarkable memoir, she writes from the point of view of being sixty-five, looking back on a rich and complex life of literature and political activism, always against the background of what it is like to have a mixed Chinese-American identity. Passages of autobiography, in which she describes such events in her life as being imprisoned with Alice Walker for demonstrating against the Iraq war, meld with a fictional journey in which she sends her avatar Wittman Ah Sing on a trip to modern China. She also evokes her own poignant journey, without a guide, back to the Chinese villages her father and mother left in order to come to America.

About the Author

Maxine Hong Kingston was born in California in 1940, the daughter of Chinese immigrants. She studied engineering at Berkeley before switching to English literature. After her marriage to actor Earll Kingston, she moved to Hawai'i where she worked as a teacher and continued to write her highly acclaimed books. She is the recipient of numerous prestigious awards including, in 2008, the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

ALSO BY MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts
China Men

Hawai'i One Summer

Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book

To Be the Poet

The Fifth Book of Peace

As Editor:

The Literature of California: Native American Beginnings to
1945

Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace

*To the Ancestors and
my contemporaries and
our children*

I Love a Broad Margin to My Life



Maxine Hong Kingston

Harvill *Secker*

HOME

I am turning 65 years of age.
In 2 weeks I will be 65 years old.
I can accumulate time *and* lose
time? I sit here writing in the dark—
can't see to change these penciled words—
just like my mother, alone, bent over her writing,
just like my father bent over his writing, alone
but for me watching. She got out of bed,
wrapped herself in a blanket, and wrote down
the strange sounds Father, who was dead,
was intoning to her. He was reading aloud
calligraphy that he'd written—carved with inkbrush—
on his tombstone. She wasn't writing in answer.
She wasn't writing a letter. Who was she writing to?
Nobody.

This well-deep outpouring is not *for*
anything. Yet we have to put into exact words
what we are given to see, hear, know.
Mother's eyesight blurred; she saw trash
as flowers. "Oh. How very beautiful."
She was lucky, seeing beauty, living
in beauty, whether or not it was there.

I am often looking in mirrors, and singling
out my face in group photographs.

Am I pretty at 65?
What does old look like?
Sometimes I am wrinkled, sometimes not.
So much depends upon lighting.
A camera crew shot pictures of me—one of
“5 most influential people over 60
in the East Bay.” I am homely; I am old.
I look like a tortoise in a curly white wig.
I am stretching head and neck toward
the light, such effort to lift the head, to open
the eyes. Black, shiny, lashless eyes.
Talking mouth. I must utter you
something. My wrists are crossed in my lap;
wrinkles run up the left forearm.
(It’s my right shoulder that hurts—Rollerblading
accident—does the pain show, does my hiding it?)
I should’ve spoken up, Don’t take
my picture, not in that glare. One side
of my neck and one cheek are gone in black
shadow. Nobody looks good in hard focus,
high contrast—black sweater and skirt,
white hair, white sofa, white
curtains. My colors and my home, but rearranged.
The crew had pushed the reds and blues and greens aside.
The photographer, a young woman, said, “Great. Great.”
From within my body, I can’t sense that crease
on my left cheek. I have to get—win—
compliments. “You are beautiful.” “So cute.”
“Such a kind face.” “You are simple.”

“You move fast.” “Chocolate Chip.”

A student I taught long ago
called me Chocolate Chip. And only yesterday
a lifelong friend told Earll, my husband,
he’s lucky, he’s got me—the Chocolate Chip.
They mean, I think, my round face
and brown-bead eyes. I keep
count. I mind that I be good-looking.
I don’t want to look like Grandmother,
Ah Po. Her likeness is the mask of tragedy.
“An ape weeps when another ape weeps.”
She is Ancestress; she is prayed to. She
sits, the queen, center of the family in China,
center of the family portrait (my mother in it too,
generations of in-laws around her)—all
is black and white but for a dot of jade-green
at Po’s ears, and a curve of jade-green
at her wrist. Lotus lily feet show
from the hem of her gown. She wanted to be
a beauty. She lived to be 100.
My mother lived to be 100. “One
hundred and three,” she said. Chinese
lie about their age, making themselves older.
Or maybe she was 97 when the lady official
from Social Security visited her, as the government visits
everyone who claims a 100th birthday.
MaMa showed off; she pedaled her exercise
bike, hammer-curved hot pink barbells.
Suddenly stopped—what if So-so Security

won't believe she's a century old?
Here's a way for calculating age: Subtract
from her age of death my age now.

$$100 - 65 = 35$$

I am 35 years-to-go.

Lately, I've been
writing a book a decade; I have time
to write 3 more books. Jane Austen
wrote 6 books. I've written 6 books.
Hers are 6 big ones, mine
4 big ones and 2 small ones.
I take refuge in numbers. I
waste my time with sudoku.
Day dawns, I am greedy, helpless
to begin 6-star difficulty
sudoku. Sun goes
down; I'm still stuck for that square
that will let the numbers fly into place.
What good am I getting out
of this? I'm not stopping time. Nothing
to show for my expenditures. Pure nothing.

8 days before my birthday, I went
to John Mulligan's funeral. He was 10
years younger than me. He died without
finishing his book, *MIAmerica*.
(I have a superstition that as long as I,
any writer, have things to write, I keep living.)
I joined in singing again and again

a refrain, "Send thou his soul to God." Earll,
though, did not sing, did not
say any of the Latin, any of the prayers.
He muttered that the Catholic Church divides you
against yourself, against your sexy body.
"The Church is a gyp." John Mulligan should've
been given a pagan ceremony; Woman Warrior,
Robert Louis Stevenson, and Cuchulain
had come to him in Viet Nam. John
carried them, tied to him by silver cords,
to the U.S. The priest, who came from the Philippines,
kept reminding one and all that the benefits
he was offering were for "Christians" only. But
he did memorialize John being born and raised
in Scotland, and coming to America at 17.
Summarily drafted to Viet Nam. You
didn't have to be a citizen to be drafted.

. . .

The war count, as of today:

Almost 2,000 killed in Iraq. G.I.s.

Not counting Afghans,

Iraqis,
civilians,
mercenaries,
children, babies,
journalists.

7 days before my birthday, I had breakfast with Mary Gordon, who's always saying things I never thought before: "It's capitalistic of us to expect any good from peace demonstrations, as if ritual has to have use, gain, profit." I agreed, "Yes, it's Buddhist to go parading for the sake of parading." "Can you think of a writer (besides Chekhov) who is holy *and* an artist?" "Grace Paley." She smiled. "Well, yes." Obviously. "Thoreau." "Oh, no. Thoreau's too Protestant, tidy, nonsexual. He goes home to Mom for hot chocolate. No sex, no tragedy, no humor." Come to think of it, Thoreau doesn't make me laugh. A line from *Walden* hangs over one of my desks:

I love a broad margin to my life.

Sitting here at this sidewalk café with Mary, deliberately taking time off from writing and teaching duties, I am making a broad margin to my life. The margin will be broader when we part, and I am alone. Thoreau swam, then sat in the doorway of his "Shelter," "large box," "dwelling-house," alone all the summer morning, rapt in the sunlight and the trees and the stillness. Birds flitted through the house. "... Until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant

highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time.”
I have a casita of my own, built instead of
a garage after the Big Fire. Its width
is the same as Thoreau’s (10 feet), its length
a yard longer. He had a loft; I have
a skylight. I want to be a painter.
Sometimes, I hear the freeway, now and again
the train, and the campanile. Thoreau heard
the band playing military music; his neighbors
were going to war against Mexico. He made up his mind
not to pay taxes.

Trying broad-
margin meditation, I sit in
the sunny doorway of my casita, amidst the yucca
and loquats and purple rain birches. Some I
planted, some volunteered. Birds—
chickadees, finches, sparrows, pairs of doves,
a pair of towhees, and their enemy, the jay. Hawk
overhead. Barn swallows at twilight.
I know: Thoreau sat with notebook
and pencil in hand. Days full of writing.

Days full of wanting.

Let them go by without worrying
that they do. Stay where you are
inside such a pure hollow note.

—RUMI

Evening, at an Oxfam Relief benefit

for Hurricane Katrina refugees, I read aloud what Gilgamesh of Uruk (Iraq!) heard about a flood. The Euphrates flattened a city "... bringing calamity down on those whom now the sea engulfs and overwhelms, my children who are now the children of fishes." Earll auctioned away a 100th anniversary Mardi Gras doubloon handed down from his family. A bakery donated an immense cake with candles, and people sang Happy Birthday to me.

6 days ahead of birthday: A small white man sat abandoned at the stairs to our garden. Summer sportcoat. It's autumn. He carried a heavy suitcase. Two bigger suitcases, trunk-size, sat on the sidewalk. "Here B and B?" he asked, and handed me papers. Lists of bed-and-breakfasts, the top one with our cross-street but no address number. A neighbor must be running a secret B & B. "Widow B and B." A widow used to live next door, but her house burned down, and we bought her vacant lot. And there's a Viet Nam widow down the street, and a faculty-wife widow 2 doors up. "I got reservation. My name is Fred. I came to see about my Social Security." Where are you from? You can go to your local Social Security office. "I came from airport. I paid shuttle thirty-one

dollars.” But it doesn’t cost nearly that to be driven here from OAK or SFO. “Shuttle van brought me here, to B and B.” Earll phoned some home-inns in the Yellow Pages, and drove Fred to a B & B, which cost \$125 a night. “One hundred and twenty-five dollars a *week*,” Fred corrected. No, no, a *day*. He looked ready to cry. “Get me a taxi.” The innkeeper called motels, and found Days Inn at \$90 per night, and a hotel at \$60 per night.

Fred told us of his life: He had been educated at San Jose State. He lived in a basement, and studied engineering. He’d made \$900 a month, then in San Francisco \$1,200 a month. Housing was \$30 a night.

“There’s no work for engineers in San Francisco anymore.” Social Security will give him \$600 every month.

Earll also—\$600 per month.

“In Iran, I live for a long time on six hundred dollars.” We took Fred to BART. Go to San Francisco.

At a big hotel, ask for a “youth hostel.”

Earll gave him a hug goodbye.

We picture the little lost man, from Iran, getting his bags stuck in the turnstile,

leaving 1 or 2 behind as the train
doors shut. Should've warned him, he has to
compete with the Katrina refugees' \$2,000
housing allowance. Should've offered him water.
In Fred's reality: Widows rent out rooms.
At B & B on the computer, hit
Print—voilà—room reserved,
room confirmed. Taxi drivers know
the place for you, and will take you to it.
Everywhere wander people who have not
the ability to handle this world.

Late the next day, we went to the City
for me to talk on the radio about veterans of war,
veterans of peace. In a waiting room, women
in scarves—Muslims—were serving food to one
another. Each one seemed to have come from
a different land and race, her headdress
and style and skin color unlike any sister's.
Silks. Velvet. Poly jacquard. Coral,
red and black, henna, aqua. Peacock.
Crystals, rhinestones. Gold thread. Impossibly
diverse cultures, yet Islam brings them together.
This corridor is an oasis on the Silk Road,
as if that thoroughfare continues through Africa,
and across oceans. An Egyptian-looking woman
held up to me, then to Earll,
a tray of fruits and vegetables. "Eid,"
she said. "Celebrate the Eid."
I chose a cherry tomato and a medjool date.

I willed my Thank you to embrace her, go through and around her, and enfold the other Muslims, the ones here, and the many far away. Thank you, Muslims, for giving food to whoever happens among you. I'm lucky, my timing in sync with their time, the sun setting, and a new moon coming up. Last day of Ramadan, women ending their fast. If not for years of practicing Buddhist silence and Quaker silence, I would've chattered away, and missed the quiet, the peace, the lovingkindness. Happy birthday to me.

Sunday, my friend Claude brought a tea grown by old Greek ladies. "It cures everything." I drink, though nothing needs curing. "Cured!" we said in unison. Monday ere birthday, I resolve, I shall rest from worry and pursuit. (In childhood chasedreams, monsters chased me. Now, I do the chasing.) Joseph, our son, calls. In a marathon read, he's finished all the books I've ever published. I'm the only writer I know whose offspring reads her. "How was it?" "Good." ("Accurate," said my mother.) Joseph cares for accuracy too. He's mailing me pages of errata: I got the Hawaiian wrong; I got the pidgin wrong. He's a musician; he has the ear. I love hearing his voice wishing me happy birthday. "I must be getting old too; I really like my power tools." He'd

read again and again the instructions on how to use a chainsaw, then cut up the pine trees without mishap. Borders in Honolulu sold all his CDs, and wants more.

My time in Hawai'i, I never learned the hula, never learned the language. Couldn't bear the music. Heard at evening, the music—mele and pila ho'okani—would stay with me all the night and into the next day.

It hurt my chest; my chest filled with tears.

Words for the feeling are: Regret. Minamina.

(*Hun*, said my mother. *Hun*, the sound of want.

Hun.) *Hun* the nation, lost. *Hun*

the land. *Hun* the beloved, loving people.

They're dancing, feasting, talking-story, singing, singing hello / goodbye. No sooner

hello than goodbye. Trees, fronds wave;

ocean waves. The time-blowing wind

smells of flowers and volcano. My son has given me the reading that I never gave my father. Why

aren't writers read by their own children?

The child doesn't want to know that the parent suffers, the parent is far, far away.

Joseph says, "Don't write about me."

"Okay. I won't do it anymore."

To read my father, I'd have to learn Chinese,

the most difficult of languages, each word a study.

A stroke off, a dot off, and you lose the word.

You get sent down for re-education. You lose your life.

My father wrote to me, poet to poet.
He replied to me. I had goaded
him: I'll tell about you, you silent man.
I'll suppose you. You speak up if I've got
you wrong. He answered me; he wrote
in the flyleaves and wide margins of the Chinese
editions of my books. I should've asked him to read
his poetry to me, and to say them in common speech.
I had had the time but not the nerve.
(Oh, but the true poet crosses eternal
distances. Perfect reader, come though 1,000
years from now. Poem can also reach
reader born 1,000 years *before*
the poem, wish it into being. Li Bai
and Du Fu, lucky sea turtles,
found each other within their lifetimes.
Oh, but these are hopeful superstitions
of Chinese time and Chinese poets.
I think non-poets live in the turning
and returning cosmos this way: An act
of love I do this morning saves a life
on a far future battlefield. And the surprising
love I feel that saves my life comes from
a person whose soul somehow corresponding
with my soul doing me a good deed 1,000
years ago.) Cold, gray October
day. I've built a fire, and sit by it.
The last fire. Wood fires are being
banned. Drinking the tea that cures everything.