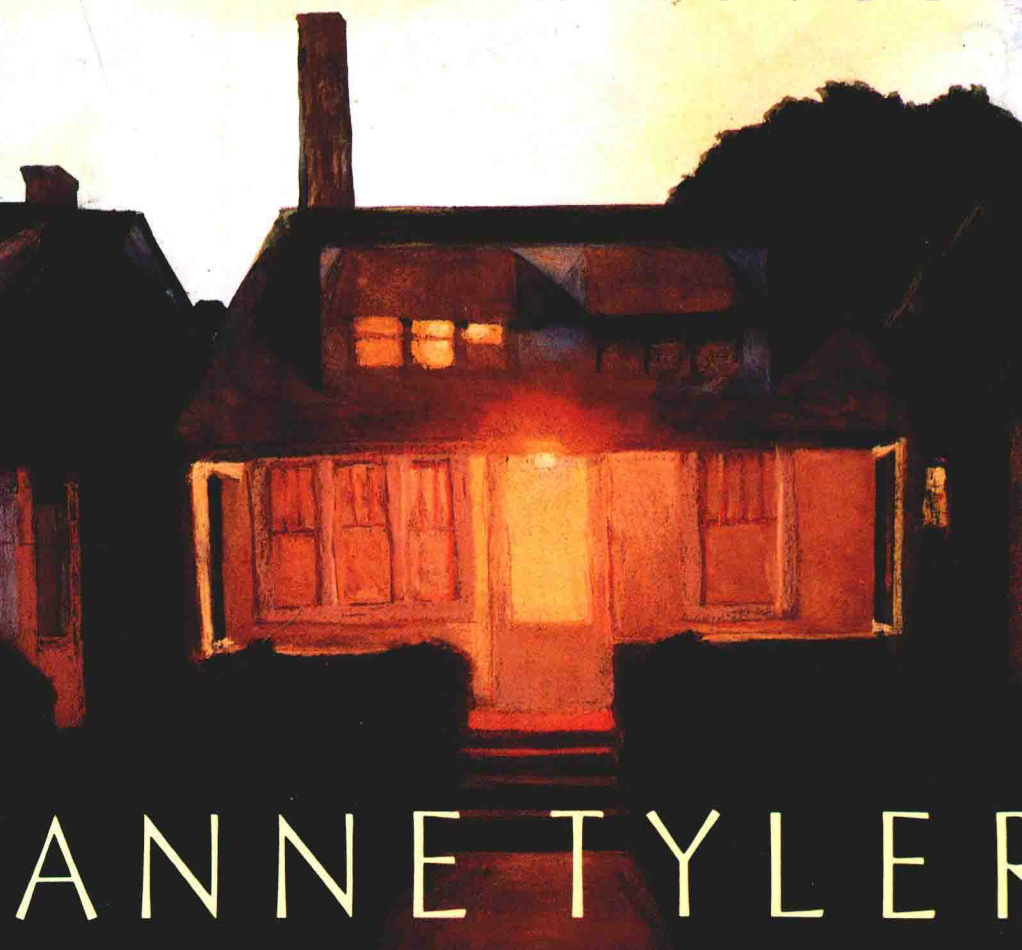


# SAINT MAYBE

A NOVEL



ANNET TYLER

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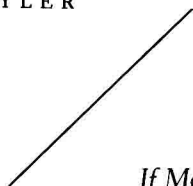
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ANNE TYLER



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*The Accidental Tourist*

*Breathing Lessons*

# Saint Maybe

spoke for me when she wrote in "Saving the Life That is Your Own," "the absence of models, in literature as in life . . . is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence."<sup>1</sup> The lack of models is an occupational as well as an emotional hazard, not only for the artist but for everyone. My search for models, however, brought together the scholarly and the personal in a way that I had never experienced before. I felt a harmony and a wholeness, for each author uncovered, not only enlarged the general field of American literature, as I saw it, but enriched and validated my existence. I learned that I am not a unique and peculiar aberration, that not every Chinese in America is an engineer or a scientist, that others have also gone the literary route. I realized that uncovering these writers and publishing this book may make the way easier for those who follow. Alice Walker has written that black women with calloused hands have appeared to her in dreams to shake her hand and to thank her for speaking for them.<sup>2</sup> I too have seen certain of my writers in dreams, and I have spoken with others in the flesh. As Walker says, "If we kill off the sound of our ancestors, the major portion of us . . . is lost." I hope this book will capture the sound of my ancestors and speak to others yet to come.

In one way, this book is also an answer to my father, who asked me a question that has rankled in me since it was posed, when I was 13 or so. "Why is it," he asked in an innocent tone, "that those who excel in every field, even those considered women's specialties—cooking, hairdressing, fashion design—have always been men?" Virginia Woolf, of course, has answered that question in *A Room of One's Own*, and others have answered it as well. That men have excelled is not because women are essentially inferior, which he was slyly implying, but that women have been denied the same opportunities as men. They have been kept out of the libraries and in the kitchen "barefoot and pregnant." So it was especially gratifying to me to discover that in this very specialized field, literature written in English by ethnic Chinese and Chinese Eurasians and published in the United States, the women not only outnumber the men but the women's books are more authentic, more numerous, quite simply—better.

It has been an exciting search, a rewarding project. And a difficult one. First, I did not have such common research tools as the card catalogue and the Library of Congress subject heading directory. In 1980, when I began my research, there was no listing for "Chinese American authors." At the Library of Congress, I asked why and was told no one had yet published a book on this subject, and if no book has been written the subject does not exist, as far as their directory is concerned. Under the heading "Asian American literature" I had better luck, for three anthologies had been published: *Asian American Authors* by Kai-yu Hsu (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), *Aiiieeeee!* by Frank Chin et al. (Washington, DC: Howard University Press,

1974), and *Asian American Heritage* by David Wand (New York: Washington Square, 1974). These pioneering collections gave me a start in identifying some authors. Wayne Miller's *Handbook of American Minorities* (New York: NYU Press, 1976) and Priscilla Oaks' *Minority Studies: An Annotated Bibliography* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976) were also helpful. Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982) was published after most of my basic research had been completed, but Professor Kim gave me some names I had not known. A colleague at Rutgers, Marjorie Li, told me about Lin Tai-yi; another colleague, Peter Li, introduced me to Eileen Chang; and one of the authors I interviewed, Diana Chang, lent me her copy of Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, which she had purchased for one dollar at a garage sale. For a while, I combed the National Union Catalogue and scoured the shelves of secondhand bookstores looking for Chinese surnames, which, fortunately, are not numerous, and in this antediluvian manner I discovered Hazel Lin and Janet Lim.

The next problem was obtaining the books. Those with copyrights as recent as five years were already out of print and most were not available in local libraries. It was further disturbing to discover that the books my university library did own, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, were shelved as sociology or, as in the case of Mai-mai Sze's *Echo of a Cry* or Winnifred Eaton's *A Japanese Blossom*, as juvenile books, mainly because they dealt with Asians or were illustrated and had children in them. Again, the very idea of Chinese American literature seemed nonexistent to the Library of Congress cataloguers who determine a volume's call number. The exception was the Wasson collection at Cornell University, which has nearly all of Winnifred Eaton's novels and from which I obtained many interlibrary loans. I was disappointed to find no listing for the "Asian American Woman's Experience" in the index to Patricia Addis' *Through a Woman's I, An: Annotated Bibliography of American Women's Autobiographical Writings 1946-1976* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1983), though the index identifies "American Indian Women's Experience" and "Black Women's Experience" and though the bibliography itself includes at least five Asian American women writers.

However, the tide is turning. Not only are Asian American writers increasing in number but they are also gaining wider recognition, beginning in the early 1970s when Lawson Fusao Inada's *Before the War: Poems as They Happened* (1971) was published by William Morrow, a major New York press; and Frank Chin's two plays, *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), were produced at New York's American Place Theatre. In 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* won the National Book Critics' Circle Award for the year's best work of nonfiction. Her second book, *China Men*, won the American Book Award in 1980. In 1981, the Obie Award for the Best New Play went to David Henry Hwang's

"F.O.B." In 1982, Cathy Song won the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition with *Picture Bride*, published by Yale University Press in 1983. *Island, Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940*, edited by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, published in 1980, demonstrated that the literary impulse among Chinese in America has a tradition and a history. In 1982, Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature*, the first book-length study of the field, proved that the body of work was large and significant enough to merit serious scholarly attention. In 1985, Genny Lim's play "Island" was aired on National Public Television. In 1987, Garrett Hongo's second book of poems, *The River of Heaven*, won the Lamont Poetry Prize of the Academy of American Poets. In 1988, David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly" won the Tony Award for Best New Dramatic Play on Broadway. In 1989, Carolyn Lau's book of poetry, *Wode Shuofa*, and Frank Chin's collection of stories, *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco Railroad Co.*, won the American Book Awards from the Before Columbus Foundation. Our numbers are growing, our voices swelling. We are no longer a silent minority.

I have had several purposes in writing this book. My initial impulse, to uncover literary gems, I later abandoned, for axiology itself, the study of evaluation and value judgments, is now in dispute among literary theoreticians and critics, Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Jane Tompkins among them. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's finely reasoned essay, "Contingencies of Value," among other works, brought to the open the questionable but hitherto unquestioned systems of evaluation within the academy, among critics, reviewers, publishers, and librarians governing notions of "classic," canonical, or Great Literature. She calls into question the assumptions that "objectivity" governs the evaluator and that "universality" is a gauge of "quality."<sup>3</sup> Jane Tompkins, in reexamining *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, asks her reader "to set aside some familiar categories for evaluating fiction—stylistic intricacy, psychological subtlety, epistemological complexity." She wants us to see the texts she examines "not as an artifice of eternity answerable to certain formal criteria . . . but as a political enterprise . . . that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time."<sup>4</sup> Tompkins' request for suspension of the "familiar categories" for evaluating texts is particularly pertinent since these conventional criteria are not always applicable to the writers of my study. Without understanding the social and historical contexts of these authors' work, full comprehension and appreciation would not be possible, and judgment without full comprehension is useless:

And yet, so often the mistaken attitude prevails: if a writer falls into oblivion it must be because s/he was unworthy, and therefore fully deserving of oblivion, for surely, if a writer is "truly outstanding," this greatness cannot help but be apparent and "will stand the test of time," as cream rises to the top. But such an attitude does not take into consideration fluctuations of taste; personal idiosyncrasies and individual purposes; political and histor-



ical conditions; perspectives and proclivities of the scholars and critics who keep an author's work in the limelight and thus in the canon. That the canon has changed may be readily seen by perusing the table of contents of literary anthologies over an extended period.

Thus, fully aware of my personal interest in the subject and equally aware that this project had never before been undertaken, yet was worthy of the undertaking, I plunged in. Setting myself a narrow focus, I have attempted, nonetheless, to be as comprehensive as possible. This book, then, is an introduction, and a history, as well as my own readings of the full-length prose narratives (autobiographies, memoirs, fictionalized memoirs, and novels) written in English and published in the United States by women of Chinese or partial Chinese ancestry. I have arranged my material roughly in chronological and thematic order to give my readers a sense of the length and breadth of the tradition. The diversity of their themes has been great, yet all the writers have obviously been conscious of their difference in a white society, a society whose attitude towards them as "other" has fluctuated depending on political circumstances. How each author has reacted to this consciousness of difference, to the between-world condition, and to the political and social environment around her is my major unifying theme.

My purpose in writing this book has been to show off the flowers in my mother's garden. I want to put these writers on the scholarly map, to give them a heading in the Library of Congress Subject Catalogue, to validate their existence and their work, to retrieve them from oblivion. With this study, I hope that other women like me will not grow up without models, in ignorance of our own history. Among these writers and their books, I hope such readers will find a source of inspiration and of communal and personal pride. Women and readers from other bi- and multicultural backgrounds will understand much in this book, for the experience of marginalization and the need for self-affirmation is common to us all. And for those who are neither Chinese American, bicultural, or female, I know that the kind of curiosity, openness, and stretching that leads such readers to investigate the experience of the Other will bring its own reward.

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank all who helped in the creation of this book: Katharine Newman, who pointed me down the road of ethnic literature, read an early draft of this manuscript, and generously gave me invaluable criticism and encouragement; Eleanor Withington, my composition professor from freshman days at Queens College and a loyal friend ever since; Elaine Kim, Abena Busia, and Shirley Lim, who helped me sharpen some fuzzy thinking; Gelston Hinds, Sr., who advised me to take a less defensive tone; Hilary Hinds and Waichee Dimock, who urged me to keep writing; Linda Ching Sledge and Laura Bromley for continuous sympathy and reassurance; Paul G. Rooney, L. Charles Laferrière, and Eileen V. Lewis, descendants of the Eaton family, who generously provided me with family anecdotes, newspaper clippings, and photographs; James Doyle, who shared his research on Edith Eaton's early Canadian publications and her interactions with her brother-in-law Walter Blackburn Harte; Silvia Xavier for her careful reading and thoughtful suggestions; Han Suyin for her interest, encouragement, and generosity in writing a foreword; and my editor, Gloria Bowles, for her critical acumen and faith in the project.

My father's question: "Why are men best in everything?" challenged me to prove him wrong. My mother's life as a Chinese child adopted by an unmarried American missionary nurse to China gave me the unifying theme. Without my husband, Gelston Hinds, Jr., whose love and unflinching belief in me and in this work took the form of oceans of babysitting and seas of pep talks, and without the understanding of my children, Arthur and Catherine, that Mommy at times had to work instead of play with them, this book would never have been launched. I thank them all for their assistance and encouragement in this project, but I must lay claim myself to the blemishes that still remain.

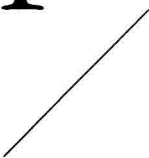
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# Saint Maybe



# 1



## The Airmail Bowling Ball

On Waverly Street, everybody knew everybody else. It was only one short block, after all—a narrow strip of patched and repatched pavement, bracketed between a high stone cemetery wall at one end and the commercial clutter of Govans Road at the other. The trees were elderly maples with lumpy, bulbous trunks. The squat clapboard houses seemed mostly front porch.

And each house had its own particular role to play. Number Nine, for instance, was foreign. A constantly shifting assortment of Middle Eastern graduate students came and went, attending classes at Johns Hopkins, and the scent of exotic spices drifted from their kitchen every evening at suppertime. Number Six was referred to as the newlyweds', although the Crains had been married two years now and were beginning to look a bit worn

around the edges. And Number Eight was the Bedloe family. They were never just the Bedloes, but the Bedloe *family*, Waverly Street's version of the ideal, apple-pie household: two amiable parents, three good-looking children, a dog, a cat, a scattering of goldfish.

In fact, the oldest of those children had long ago married and left—moved out to Baltimore County and started a family of her own—and the second-born was nearing thirty. But somehow the Bedloes were stuck in people's minds at a stage from a dozen years back, when Claudia was a college girl in bobby socks and Danny was captain of his high-school football team and Ian, the baby (his parents' big surprise), was still tearing down the sidewalk on his tricycle with a miniature license plate from a cereal box wired to the handlebar.

Now Ian was seventeen and, like the rest of his family, large-boned and handsome and easygoing, quick to make friends, fond of a good time. He had the Bedloe golden-brown hair, golden skin, and sleepy-looking brown eyes, although his mouth was his mother's, a pale beige mouth quirking upward at the corners. He liked to wear ragged jeans and plaid shirts—cotton broadcloth in summer, flannel in winter—unbuttoned all the way to expose a stretched-out T-shirt underneath. His shoes were high-top sneakers held together with electrical tape. This was in 1965, when Poe High School still maintained at least a vestige of a dress code, and his teachers were forever sending him home to put on something more presentable. (But his mother was likely to greet him in baggy, lint-covered slacks and one of his own shirts, her fading blond curls pinned scrappily back with a granddaughter's pink plastic hairbow. *She* would not have passed the dress code either.) Also, there were complaints about the quality of Ian's schoolwork. He was bright, his teachers said, but lazy. Content to slide through with low B's or even C's. It was the spring of his junior year and if he didn't soon mend his ways, no self-respecting college would have him.

Ian listened to all this with a tolerant, bemused expression.

Things would turn out fine, he felt. Hadn't they always? (None of the Bedloes was a worrier.) Crowds of loyal friends had surrounded him since kindergarten. His sweetheart, Cicely Brown, was the prettiest girl in the junior class. His mother doted on him and his father—Poe's combination algebra teacher and baseball coach—let him pitch in nearly every game, and not just because they were related, either. His father claimed Ian had talent. In fact sometimes Ian daydreamed about pitching for the Orioles, but he knew he didn't have *that* much talent. He was a medium kind of guy, all in all.

Even so, there were moments when he believed that someday, somehow, he was going to end up famous. Famous for what, he couldn't quite say; but he'd be walking up the back steps or something and all at once he would imagine a camera zooming in on him, filming his life story. He imagined the level, cultured voice of his biographer saying, "Ian climbed the steps. He opened the door. He entered the kitchen."

"Have a good day, hon?" his mother asked, passing through with a laundry basket.

"Oh," he said, "the usual run of scholastic triumphs and athletic glories." And he set his books on the table.

His biographer said, "He set his books on the table."

That was the spring that Ian's brother fell in love. Up till then Danny had had his share of girlfriends—various decorative Peggies or Debbies to hang upon his arm—but somehow nothing had come of them. He was always getting dumped, it seemed, or sadly disillusioned. His mother had started fretting that he'd passed the point of no return and would wind up a seedy bachelor type. Now here was Lucy, slender and pretty and dressed in red, standing in the Bedloes' front hall with her back so straight, her purse held so firmly in both hands, that she seemed even smaller than she was. She seemed childlike, in fact, although Danny described her as a "woman" when he introduced her. "Mom,



Dad, Ian, I'd like you to meet the woman who's changed my life." Then Danny turned to Mrs. Jordan, who had chosen this inopportune moment to step across the street and borrow the pinking shears. "Mrs. Jordan: Lucy Dean."

His mother, skipping several stages of acquaintanceship, swept Lucy into a hug. (Clearly more was called for than a handshake.) His father said, "Well, now! What do you know!" The dog gave Lucy's crotch a friendly sniff, while Mrs. Jordan—an older lady, the soul of tact—hastily murmured something or other and backed out the door. And Ian clamped his palms in his armpits and grinned at no one in particular.

They moved to the living room, Ian bringing up the rear. Lucy perched in an easy chair and Danny settled on its arm, with one hand resting protectively behind her loose knot of black hair. To Ian, Lucy resembled some brightly feathered bird held captive by his brown plaid family. Her face was very small, a cameo face. Her dress was scoop-necked and slim-waisted and full-skirted. She wore extremely red lipstick that seemed not gaudy, for some reason, but brave. Ian was entranced.

"Tell us everything," Bee Bedloe ordered. "Where you met, how you got to know each other—everything."

She and Ian's father had seated themselves on the sofa. (Ian's father, who had a baseball player's mild, sloping build, was pulling in his stomach.) Ian himself remained slouched against the door frame.

"We met at the post office," Danny said. He beamed down at Lucy, who smiled back at him trustfully.

Bee said, "Oh? You two work together?"

"No, no," Lucy said, in a surprisingly croaky little drawl. "I went in to mail a package and Danny was the one who waited on me."

Danny told them, "She was mailing a package to Cheyenne, Wyoming, by air. I told her it would cost twenty dollars and twenty-seven cents. You could see it was more than she'd planned on—"