



Understanding Gish Jen (Understanding Contemporary American Literature)

Jennifer Ann Ho

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Jennifer Ann Ho introduces readers to a “typical American” writer, Gish Jen, the author of four novels, *Typical American*, *Mona in the Promised Land*, *The Love Wife*, and *World and Town*; a collection of short stories, *Who’s Irish?*; and a collection of lectures, *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self*. Jen writes with an engaging, sardonic, and imaginative voice illuminating themes common to the American experience: immigration, assimilation, individualism, the freedom to choose one’s path in life, and the complicated relationships that we have with our families and our communities. A second-generation Chinese American, Jen is widely recognized as an important American literary voice, at once accessible, philosophical, and thought-provoking. In addition to her novels, she has published widely in periodicals such as the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Yale Review*.

Ho traces the evolution of Jen’s career, her themes, and the development of her narrative voice. In the process she shows why Jen’s observations about life in the United States, though revealed through the perspectives of her Asian American and Asian immigrant characters, resonate with a variety of audiences who find themselves reflected in Jen’s accounts of love, grief, desire, disappointment, and the general domestic experiences that shape all our lives.

Following a brief biographical sketch, Ho examines each of Jen’s major works, showing how she traces the transformation of immigrant dreams into mundane life, explores the limits of self-identification, and characterizes problems of cross-national communication alongside the universal problems of aging and generational conflict. Looking beyond Jen’s fiction work, a final chapter examines her essays and her concerns and stature as a public intellectual, and detailed primary and secondary bibliographies provide a valuable point of departure for both teaching and future scholarship.

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