

Film offers affirmation of the bonds of family

Movie counters old stereotypes

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Capping off the summer season is a beautiful movie from Hollywood Pictures, *The Joy Luck Club*.

Wayne Wang directs from Amy Tan's 1989 best-selling novel of the same name about four Chinese immigrant mothers trying to resolve prickly relationships with their four Americanized daughters.

A multilayered story, the movie is framed by a San Francisco bon voyage party for daughter June (Ming-Na Wen), who is about to visit China for the first time to meet her long-lost twin sisters. Her mother (Kieu Chinh) has recently died and at the party June takes her place alongside her three "aunties" (Tsai Chin, France Nuyen, Lisa Lu) at their mah-jongg game.

In a series of point-of-view flashbacks, each mother relives her dramatic struggle for survival in China, which subsequently affected how she

raised each daughter.

The four younger women (Tamlyn Tomita, Lauren Tom and Rosalind Chao play the other daughters) are struggling with their self-esteem in relationships with men and nagging resentments that their mothers were too critical of them all along.

Director Wang skillfully weaves together the heartwrenching stories of what the mothers went through in their homeland with glimpses of the daughters' current troubled lives. When, at crucial moments, the mothers are able to find the right words to help their daughters, the movie's insights achieve a universality that appeals to the mind as much as the heart.

The drama, however, is not easy entertainment. One must pay close attention to keep straight the characters in the eight stories — especially since the women are played by 17 actresses at different ages in China and the United States. There is also a certain sameness to the mother-daughter problems as the narrative plays out. Lastly, it builds to a three-hanky movie that can be emotionally draining by its sentimental conclusion.

Yet these drawbacks pale in the epic sweep of the multigenerational saga,



Buena Vista Pictures
Director Wayne Wang brings Amy Tan's best-selling novel *The Joy Luck Club* to the screen. The film tells the complex story of two generations of Chinese women and their American daughters.

exquisitely photographed in lush detail, especially the exotic Chinese stories.

The film's serious nature, with its welcome absence of Asians as stereotypical figures, is refreshing, and it is hoped more such movies will be made.

The cast, including several little girls who play the women as young children, is superb. Though it is easy to categorize this as a "woman's film," men are just as likely to be drawn in by the fully realized characters. From

their intimate portraits develops an affirmation of the enduring bonds of love and family.

The Joy Luck Club is more about hope than joy or luck, but it is a club you will want to check out.

Because of brief violence including a suicide, a discreet sexual encounter, much sexual innuendo and minimal rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

Merton's letters to fellow writers provide new insights

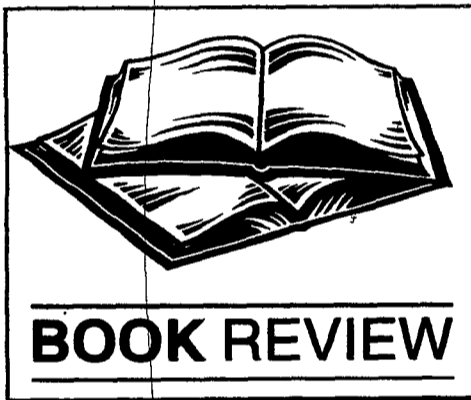
The Courage for Truth: Thomas Merton's Letters to Writers, selected and edited by Christine M. Bochen; Farrar Straus and Giroux (New York, N.Y., 1993); \$25 (cloth).

By Monsignor William H. Shannon
Guest contributor

In his vast correspondence Thomas Merton wrote to people in various professions, in different walks of life and with a wide variety of commitments. What gives a very special character to this fourth volume of the Thomas Merton letters is that he is communicating with people in a field most congenial to him: he was writing to writers.

Writing was a part of Merton's life since his early youth. It remained a strong passion all his life. Though he entered the monastery of Gethsemani with the conviction that he would no longer be able to write and with (so he thought) the firm resolve that he would give up writing completely, he happily did not have to put that resolve to the test. Fortunately, he had abots who insisted on his using this God-given talent. I doubt if he would have survived as a monk had he been obliged to cease writing. Writing was in his blood and in his spirit.

This explains this volume's delightful comfortableness. He was in touch



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with people whose company he enjoyed, even if he could only be with them through the medium of letters. And the company was an ever-widening circle of literary friends and intellectuals in Europe, in the Soviet Union, in Latin America, and in the United States.

The Courage for Truth's opening section is made up of the charming set of letters to a British author, the brilliant but often arrogant Evelyn Waugh, whom Merton describes as "the best living author we've got," to whom he turns for advice on writing skills and to whom he gives advice (unsolicited) on the devotional life he thought Waugh ought to be living.

The second section, comprising a little more than one quarter of the

book, contains remarkable letters to the distinguished French writer and Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain; to the well-known Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz; and to the Russian poet and novelist, Boris Pasternak, whose *Dr. Zhivago* (banned in Russia) made him famous throughout the world: "Although we are separated by great distances ... it gives me pleasure to speak to you as to one whom I feel to be a kindred mind."

Sections three and four are made up of letters to writers in Latin America. Merton felt a special affinity with that region of the world. To a Nicaraguan poet, he writes: "It seems to me that I fit more naturally into Latin American culture than into that of North America." The third section is devoted entirely to the many letters Merton wrote to Ernesto Cardenal, who was a novice under his direction for a time, then because of health problems returned to Latin America where he was ordained a priest.

Cardenal looked to Merton as his spiritual father. Merton relied in Cardenal for knowledge of what was happening in Latin America. Their lengthy correspondence lasted from 1959-68. Merton confided in Cardenal his frustrations at Gethsemani and the never-to-be-realized hope that he had of becoming a hermit in Latin America.

Section four offers a healthy list of other Latin American writers, 17 in all, who are representative of the various culture of that area of the world. Merton was enthusiastic, even romantic, about their writings and about the hopes he saw in them for the world's future.

The final section of *The Courage for Truth* presents letters to North American authors. These correspondences tend to be briefer than the others. They nonetheless include important names in American literature such as James Baldwin, Henry Miller, Walker Percy, Louis Zukofsky and a number of others.

The editor, Dr. Christine M. Bochen, chairwoman of the Religious Studies Department at Nazareth College of Rochester, has written brief, but helpfully informative biographies of the correspondents selected for this volume. Her notes between many of the letters and her careful and generous clarifications within the letters greatly enhance the book's readability.

Skillfully edited and presenting a Merton new to many people, *The Courage for Truth* will attract a wide audience. This it richly deserves. And the price is right.

Monsignor Shannon is professor emeritus at Nazareth College.

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