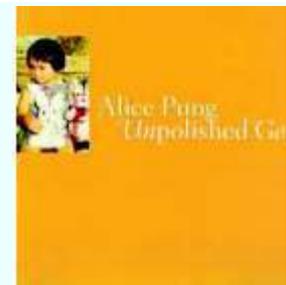




# Asian voices add to the great chorus



## James Massola talks to two writers whose work is adding a distinctive dimension to the cacophony of Australian cultural life

The history of Australia is a history of immigration. While we may not have an antipodean version of Lady Liberty standing proud in the middle of Sydney Harbour, we are a nation of immigrants.

From indigenous Australians, through Anglo-European immigration of English, Irish and Scots, Germans and Austrians, Italians and Greeks, Lebanese and on to Sudanese, Somalian and other new African-Australians.

One group that has tended to fly under the cultural radar is Asian-Australians – at least in the literary world.

But all that is changing now.

Two Asian-Australian authors, Nam Le and Alice Pung, are making their mark within the literary community.

It's about time, too.

Chinese citizens, for one, began arriving on our shores during the great gold rush of the 1850s.

But then again, the White Australia policy lasted until 1973, and the appearance of politicians such as Pauline Hanson in the more recent past is only the most visible reminder that a simmering undercurrent, a sense of Asian "otherness", has existed in our multicultural national for a long time.

So how does a cultural subgroup enter the mainstream?

Books like Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* began the process years ago, but until now Asian-Australians have been notably under-represented in the annals of Australian literature.

But the literature of Pung and Le is playing a big part in changing that.

Though their works is strikingly different, if nothing else the authors share an authentic migrant experience – an experience crucial to the making of their literary personas.

Nam Le's *The Boat* is one of the success stories of the year; the precocious 29-year-old's first collection of short stories plays with ideas of authenticity, identity and, self-referentially, the idea that "ethnic literature" sells, and sells big.

Le says he has been surprised by the rave reviews – "You don't expect much attention for a new book, especially a book of short stories" – but *The Boat* is a work far too subtle and intelligent to ignore. Le's love of the written word and beginnings as a poet burst through on to the page in crafted, delicate sentences – but it is the breadth of ideas, the simulacra of situations, that make one sit up and take notice.

He confronts the dangers of being pigeon-holed as "ethnic literature" in the first story, and doesn't slow down from there. In the story, a fictional character, also named Nam, is urged by classmates and literary types that "ethnic lit" is "hot" and that he should "totally exploit it".

But Le the author shies away from the literary cul-de-sac of ethnic literature – even if it is "hot" right now.

"I think the danger [of being pigeon-holed] might be somewhat mitigated in my case by the first story in my collection, which treats this idea of ethnic identity and its relationship to writing," he says.

His stories range far and wide, taking in a Columbian hit man/boy, Hiroshima and New York painters with haemorrhoids.

Why stray so far?

"I don't like to think of my work as representing anything other than myself," he says.

But why not write a memoir? After all, authors such as Alice Pung, Augusten Burroughs and Dave Eggers have had highly acclaimed memoirs, all at a relatively young ages, published in the past decade.



Alice Pung: "Speaking to kids is more important to me than the headline-grabbing stuff"



Nam Le: "Fiction has the scope to tell a greater truth than non-fiction"

“Fiction has the scope to tell a greater truth than non-fiction.

“When you are writing memoir, and you stick yourself front and centre in the narrative, it’s very difficult to get out from under the shadow of the question of ‘What are people going to think of me?’ ”

But isn’t he worried about a perceived lack of authenticity – after all, what does he know about a Columbian hit boy?

“To me authenticity is an incredibly loaded and complex idea. I don’t think there is a simple nexus between lived experience and autobiographical narration in writing,” he says.

“People will come to the stories in individual ways. I think of my main responsibility as being to the work.”

Le is at pains to emphasise that he writes fiction. After playing with the idea of exploiting ethnic literature in a thoroughly post-modern fashion in a first story, he bookends *The Boat* with an “ethnic story” – but does so with a nod and a wink.

“I would say that the final story, which deals

with the refugee experience of a young Vietnamese woman, was as completely imagined as any of the other stories set in Columbia, America, Iran or Japan,” he says.

“It was completely imagined. I tried to get as much imagination and research as in all the [other] stories.”

But surely he is being disingenuous – didn’t he hear his mother’s story of arriving in Australia by boat, three-month-old Le in her arms?

“I really didn’t get stories about that when I was growing up. [It was] partly familial, partly cultural reserve, [even though] it would seem likely that such a story could have happened,” he says.

While Le sails his literary boat into uncharted waters, away from the “easy pickings” of ethnic literature and memoir, Alice Pung’s 2006 memoir, *Unpolished Gem*, received to wide acclaim, is firmly situated in that ground.

And while Le’s work does not always hit the mark – author Hari Kunzru took a shot or two across the bows at *The Boat* in the *New York Times* – Pung’s work was roundly feted and



praised, at least in part because of the authenticity of her authorial voice.

One critic called it a “memoir so vivid that images from it linger behind your eyelids”; another complimented Pung as a storyteller who achieved a tone “both lush and raw”.

Pung has followed *Unpolished Gem* by editing *Growing up Asian in Australia*, an anthology of memoir that convokes 55 voices to discuss and reflect on the Asian-Australian experience.

It is a raw and honest book; big-names and no-names alike lift the veil on the mundane and the extraordinary, examining everything from racism and familial habits to shame at not speaking one’s putative mother tongue.

The brevity of some of the stories in *Growing up Asian* might lead to charges of an occasional lack of subtlety, compared to Le’s best work.

But this tightly edited book benefits from the gentle honesty of unique lived experience – and is very engaging in a way that Le’s more challenging work is perhaps not.

Of course, in editing a work of this nature, and hot on the heels of a memoir of Asian-Australian-ness, Pung has opened herself up to being made a lightning rod for the “Asian community”, if such an homogenous identity even exists.

It’s an idea she dismisses, not something she is comfortable with.

“I can only share my experience from 28 years of life, that’s all I can do,” she says.

One wonders if *Growing up Asian* is an attempt to disperse the burden of being such an identifiable figure?

“It doesn’t scare me to be a figurehead, but there are 55 other authors in this anthology that I have edited. I’m not the only voice . . . it’s not possible to be a lightning rod.”

What does interest Pung is speaking to the kids who will grow up reading her books.

At a recent session at the Melbourne Writers Festival – on a decidedly unglamorous Monday morning – Pung delighted in her audience, enchanting and horrifying them in equal measure with stories about her grandmother sucking snot out of her baby brother’s nose, what it was like to be called a “power point” and telling them it’s OK to fail.

“Speaking to kids is more important to me than the headline-grabbing stuff because it’s earnest. Sometimes the headline-grabbing stuff makes me uncomfortable,” she says.

“I have letters from students who have said, ‘What you say matters to me, no one has ever told me I can fail, no one has ever told me it’s OK to not do so well.’ ”

The success of Pung and Le is remarkable, really, when one considers the similarities in their personal experience, and the differences in their approaches to their world.

Both grew up in Melbourne. Pung’s heritage is Cambodian-Chinese and Le’s is Vietnamese; her family escaped the Cambodia of Pol Pot, his the victorious communists.

Both are lawyers who have made a break for more fertile creative pastures, and both are under 30, a fact belied by the mature, if very different nature of their writings.

That they may, broadly speaking, share elements of heritage and culture, not to mention life experience, and yet have emerged as such different writers, with different missions, is testimony to the broad church of literature.

It’s also testimony to the multiplicity of the Asian-Australian experience, too disparate and different to homogenise and label “the other”.

Australians have struggled with the top-down ideas of multiculturalism and assimilation; both frameworks are fraught with limitations.

So while culture warriors of different stripes and hues would direct culture in a national context, like something that can be farmed and fostered in a Petri dish – controlled, measured, directed – best results are often achieved in a more organic fashion.

Culture seeps in through the cracks, amorphous, ever-changing, subject to whim and woe.

Shows such as *Acropolis Now* and *Wogs out of Work*, pizza restaurants and champion footballers have arguably done a lot more for the acceptance of the Greek and Italian communities than any government campaign.

So it is that as the *The Boat* and *Growing up Asian in Australia* take their place in Australian culture, if they can teach us anything, it is that a quorum of voices is never just that – it’s a cacophony, a symphony, even a broad community, Australian all.

