

A book in every child

Melbourne author **Alice Pung** grew up in the western suburbs. Now she is involved with an innovative project in Footscray to get unlikely kids writing.

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e begin our story with an average profile of the multi-cultural and multi-lingual chil-

dren in Braybrook, one of Victoria's most disadvantaged and linguistically diverse suburbs. The main languages other than English spoken are Vietnamese (22.6 per cent), Cantonese (7.1 per cent), Somali (2.7 per cent) and Mandarin (2.6 per cent). In this neighbourhood the children's duties at home in the urban jungle are adult in nature.

They translate for their parents at doctors' and health clinics, interpret telephone calls with utility companies, fill in their own school enrolment forms, look after aged grandparents, do the grocery shopping, cook, launder and take care of younger siblings, sew clothes, build fences, or help serve customers at the family business. I know this area well because I went to the local state school, and these were all after-school duties my friends and I performed.

Footballers from the then Footscray Bulldogs AFL team would often come and serve us breakfast and give us stickers. We felt very lucky in our primary school years. A teacher named Miss Higgins let us have "working pills" (Smarties) before we had to do hard maths and bought us toys for Christmas.

I did not know, until I was an adult, that the footballers came because our school was disadvantaged. I did not notice that as the years went by and more and more refugees moved into the neighbourhood, the school became increasingly multicultural. When I was 18, I saw my local primary school in the local paper, not for any special achievement, but because it was falling apart, with one angry parent quoted as saying, "I wouldn't even let pigs go there."

Yet I don't remember the school being so bad. I remember the good teachers, because these were the people who shaped me into becoming a writer. I came to school not speaking a word of English, with absolutely no common cultural capital. The only literature my mother read was the Safeway and Bi-Lo ads that came every Tuesday in our letterbox. The rest of the time, she was in the back shed working. My grand-

mother once asked me to help her read two words in her insurance policy, because they were next to a particularly large sum. I refused. "All that schooling, and you're completely useless!" she scoffed, "I'll ask your father when he returns." Of course I knew what the two words were, but I did not want to upset her. The two words were "In Death".

I knew a lot about death because the adults in my family would never stop talking about it. My family were survivors of the Cambodian Killing Fields. My cousins from Cambodia were working in the fields when they should have been in school. They were foraging for food to ward off starvation, and the first time they tasted ice they thought it was "hot".

Our parents obsessed over cleanliness and comfort. Their greatest

dream was that one day their children would get comfortable jobs. This is the motif of every migrant parent's aspirations for their children, one that is unequivocally tied with the idea of the Great Australian/American/Canadian Dream: build a nice house in the outer suburbs and get a nice car. Have a job where you sit at a desk during the day instead of burning your back in the sun, where the greatest occupational hazard is getting a papercut, not being mauled by machinery. In essence, don't suffer as your parents have.

It is then understandable why this would be a dream that is diametrically opposed to a career as a dancer, a non-classical musician, scriptwriter, cartoonist, journalist or artist. Creating art means taking risks. Taking risks means you deliberately put yourself in danger of economic uncertainty, loss of public regard, and the prospect of failure.

Parents who have been safely settled in Australia for generations might see the value of cultivating creativity in children because they do not see life as only giving you one chance or shot at something; but refugee or migrant parents might feel less inclined to entertain that risk because it is either too hard – their children have to inhabit and learn the language and ways of a whole new culture in order to create its art – or they feel they are simply too far behind to even reach for such lofty ideals. Better to reach for the low-hanging fruit of career security.

But here in Braybrook were kids who knew about death (it was discussed almost on a daily basis), the adult world, the developmental stages of babies, conflict, the real value of a Barbie doll (three weeks helping mum iron interfacing into shirt collars, or 300 shirts, if we were using the currency of the Chinese and Vietnamese friends of my youth). Imagine listening to the voices of such kids. Imagine hearing their opinions on pop culture, or the silly foibles of their families, or the tales of their elders. What pop stars would they look up to? What do they think about their siblings? What do they think about ghouls? What warnings did their grandparents give them?

Imagine if their parents could see what a difference it made to their children if they developed the ability to communicate with not only their peers, but other adults. Better yet, imagine that they took all this cultural capital

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and not only talked about it, but wrote and edited books illustrated by professional artists, to be published professionally and sold in stores.

This is what Lachlann Carter, Jenna Williams and Jessica Tran of the 100 Story Building understand about children and writing. Children who were traditionally the most voiceless in society, except when they were acting on behalf of their parents and learning the adult voice, are now writing as children again – about zombies, strange animals, secret trapdoors, scary monsters and sea creatures. They write about mischievous wanton destruction and great acts of valour.

The 100 Story Building is in the Barkly Street Mall in Footscray, a place where I spent many childhood afternoons loitering with my brother, before it became a place where drug deals were conducted with blasé and open regularity. But now it is a busy pedestrian mall again. The building is right next to the Commonwealth Bank, and the boarded-up skeleton of the former Forges Department Store. It used to be a retail space, but now has floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with books plus an assortment of strange curiosities: jars labelled with "Word Count" (Scrabble letters), "Royalties" (plastic coins) and "Recipe Ideas" (small toy farmyard animals). Light bulbs hang from the ceiling in cork-stoppered glass bottles. The tables are made from reclaimed old-furniture wood, and there is a secret revolving bookshelf that has a room behind it.

Carter and Williams, who are a couple in their private as well as professional lives, had asked the kids to help them with designing the fitout of the 100 Story Building space. In the end, they settled on the secret door and the conceit of the building – a sealed trapdoor with DANGER! CONSTRUCT-



TION ZONE tape and signs all around. This trapdoor leads to the other 99 storeys of the building underground. There is a noticeboard next to the trapdoor, with messages such as:

Level 42 has a spare golf buggy. Contact Gini.

Fenwick Abernarty is looking for love. Level 70.

Attention! Danger! Level 22 is currently overrun with rabid adjectives.

Do not approach.

Carter, a primary school teacher and CEO of the 100 Story Building, is running a school holiday zombie zine-making workshop on the day I visit. The room is filled with children aged from five to 14. "I didn't spell something right in my character's speech bubble," confesses a six-year-old boy with corkscrew curls, looking down at his "Exquisite Corpse" – a picture composed by multiple artists, each drawing a different part of the character without seeing what the person before them has done.

"Don't worry, that's how your character speaks!" Carter proclaims. "The character speaks with incorrect spelling!" The kids erupt in friendly laughter.

Carter is everything a primary school teacher should be: he does not offer unwarranted praise (it has to be meaningful); he does not treat the children like cute things; he tells funny stories about when he first learnt to shave at the age of five with toothpaste and his dad's razor and cut himself, and he understands his role is not to teach but to help kids unleash their creativity.

When I first met Carter and Williams in 2012 in a cafe in Melbourne, the first thing I noticed about them was how crazily enthusiastic they were. They tell me that they started with a program partnering primary

school-aged children with established writers in an epistolary relationship that involved the children writing to the authors, introducing themselves, and sending along a story they had written. The author would then help the student shape, draft and redraft the story until it was fit for publication in a lovely professional volume – the kind of book you would buy in a shop. Their second major project was *Early Harvest*, a journal of young Australian writing, run in partnership with *Harvest Magazine*.

"Children respond wholeheartedly to the creativity of other children," Williams tells me, and when I ask her to explain, Carter recounts a story. "When I visit schools," he says, "I take some books in to show the students, among which are a few copies of *Early Harvest*. I read some of the stories out, and then tell them that these were written by kids like them. Every time, the kids will always want to hear stories written by other kids." Carter refers to the contributors in *Early Harvest* as authors. "That's how the kids identify themselves, too."

I then realised Carter and Williams were serious about their 100 Story Building project, and of having a building for kids to see how the writing, illustrating and creative industries worked. "We want kids to get an understanding of the work involved," explains Williams, "and to dissect the creative process. No matter who you are, there is a creative process." At the 100 Story Building, there is a wall of framed draft manuscript pages from authors such as Sally Rippin and Andy Griffiths. These pages are heavily marked up with red ink corrections or pencil edits.

Carter talks about teaching the kids to honour the work. Every workshop he conducts is not necessarily focused

Teacher Lachlann Carter is CEO of Footscray's 100 Story Building, where children can see how the writing, illustrating and other creative industries work.

Photo: Luis Ascui

on praising the quality of the completed writing piece. "In our second program, kids were asked to not do just one draft of a piece of writing, but to submit draft after draft – five or six drafts," he says. "Of course, they weren't keen to do this. Some of them were complaining, awww, do we have to do this? But then the more drafts they did, the more they felt connected to their work, and the more pride they had in it."

"I've never questioned the link between kids and the necessity of creativity to their development," confesses Williams, "because when I was younger, I participated heavily in the arts, in theatre groups. What 100 Story Building hopes to achieve is access, to reinforce the creativity of children with opportunities inside and outside of school."

I was beginning to understand what Carter and Williams were seeking to accomplish. It was grand, but not far-fetched. It was ambitious but not unrealistic. Most of all, it was about real hope and not false dreams. They were trying to give children mentors, and ensure that they saw the creative life as a very real possibility. Just as those visiting footballers gave the boys of our primary school pride and esteem, and the conviction that they could be just like their heroes some day in the future, Carter and Williams hope to give these kids a conviction that they could be their literary heroes if they understood the process and worked at it.

The third founding member of the 100 Story Building is Jessica Tran, who quit her job in a well-regarded Melbourne publishing house to become the development manager of 100 Story Building.

Tran understands the mentality of some parents who might not be so amenable to sending their kids to a

creative workshop: "I always think about my old school friend when I was growing up; she in some ways had a similar background to me, but both of her parents were Vietnamese." Tran's dad is Vietnamese and her mum is Anglo-Australian. "Her parents had very limited English skills so she ended up translating a lot of stuff for them, and going back and forth about things. She didn't get any of that imaginative encouragement from them because they obviously wanted her to succeed and do well at school. It was just an opportunity she didn't have, even though we all went to the same school. It was just that cultural barrier of 'that's not how you did things'."

"We wanted to make sure that every time we are communicating with anyone we are saying, 'You're welcome here, that's what we're here for' and people have reacted very well to that. I hope that there would be no one who walks past and thinks, 'oh, that's not for me'. And we will keep working on this."

Despite my initial – and very short-lived – scepticism, I was completely welcomed by Carter, Williams and Tran from day one. They were true to their word about community engagement. They established friendships with all the local businesses. Even though they are a registered charity, they made contact with the Footscray Traders' Association. Carter and Williams moved to the western suburbs, and Williams now works at the Footscray Community Arts Centre.

She talks about the challenges of language, different cultural values and understanding of education, as well as how families understand the role and purpose of education. She stresses the absolute importance of family connection and schools to the success of the enterprise. "We've been working for five years in the west," Williams explains, "I am trying to not have preconceptions about the area, or accepting that I do and trying to put them aside where I can. This is an ongoing process."

At 100 Story Building, Melbourne University education professor Pam Macintyre is on the board of directors, as is Michael Short, writer for *The Age*. The respected theatre director Dave Nguyen, who works with marginalised children and young adults, is an adviser on the programming and evaluation subcommittee.

Even if you grew up here, but moved out and feel like you have moved on, you never forget this about the western suburbs of Melbourne and its people: we may eventually have the material things in life, but unless we gain cultural capital – the courage to speak out in public and even run for election, the power to be heard in newspapers and journals across the land, and even the simple dream of being able to have the collected works of Shakespeare on the shelf – we are going to remain insular and isolated from the sphere in which decisions are made about us, alienated from the wider community and avenues of power.

This is why helping children in the west learn how to communicate effectively is important, and one of the greatest goals the 100 Story Building can accomplish.

Alice Pung is the Footscray-born author of the award-winning *Her Father's Daughter* (Black Inc, 2013) and *Unpolished Gem* (Black Inc, 2006) and the editor of *Growing up Asian in Australia* (Black Inc, 2008). She is a board member of the 100 Story Building. This is an edited version of an essay in the *Griffith Review*.