

Comfortable . . . Alice Pung is content to be both lawyer and writer. 'I value security, I know what it's like to be poor.'  
Photo by SARAH REED



## In her words

Extract from *Unpolished Gem*, by Alice Pung (Black Inc., \$34.95).

Wah, so many things about this new country that are so taken for granted! It is a country where no one walks like they have to hide. From the top floor of the Rialto building my parents see that the people below amble in a different manner, and not just because of the heat. No bomb is ever going to fall on top of them. No one pissing in the street, except of course in a few select suburbs. No lepers. No Khmer Rouge-type soldiers dressed like black ants prodding occupants of the Central Business District into making a mass exodus to Wangaratta. Most people here have not even heard about Brother Number One in Socialist Cambodia, and to uninitiated ears his name sounds like an Eastern European stew: "Would you like some Pol Pot? It's made with 100 per cent fresh-ground suffering."

# God of small things

A tale of migrants settling in a new country focuses on the little successes, writes DEBORAH BOGLE.

**C**OCOONED under the bedclothes with her grandmother, little Alice Pung sank into sleep at night listening to the old lady's stories from the past. Of Cambodia, where the young activist sought refuge after she fell foul of Chinese Communist Party officials just before Mao's revolutionary wave broke; and of her ancestors in her Teochew home province.

"All her stories began with things in the past, in Long Mountain, China or Cambodia, the Golden Towers," writes Pung in *Unpolished Gem*. Pung weaves her grandmother's stories, her old-fashioned Chinese wisdom, observations and prejudices into her memoir of growing up in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray. First her parents, her aunt and her paternal grandmother, then more aunts, uncles, cousins and her maternal grandparents joined other Indochinese immigrants making new lives in the suburban enclave.

Her grandfather had been murdered in Pol Pot's Killing Fields, and her father's family fled to Vietnam before migrating to Australia.

Alice was their first-born, "a crumple-faced walnut" delivered in a clean, white hospital with pastel curtains and "not a trace of blood or sour meat smell".

Her father, summoned from his work to the hospital, feared the worst, and was surprised to discover that the doctors simply thought he would want to be present for the

*Unpolished Gem*, by Alice Pung, is this month's selection for The Big Book Club. Pung will speak at the following events:  
**Thursday, September 27:** 10.30am @ Noarlunga Library, Hannah Rd, Noarlunga Centre. Free including morning tea. Bookings on 8384 0655.  
1.30pm @ Hamra Centre Library, 1 Brooker Tce, Hilton. Free including afternoon tea. Bookings on 8416 6228.  
6.30pm @ The Belgian Beer Cafe, 27-29 Ebenezer Place, Adelaide. Free. Bookings on 8348 2311.  
**Friday, September 28:** 10.30am @ Salisbury Youth Enterprise Centre, 17-19 Wiltshire St, Salisbury. Free, including morning tea. Bookings on 8406 8233.

## The Advertiser THE BIG BOOK CLUB Literary Event

1.30pm @ Goodwood Library, 101 Goodwood Rd, Goodwood. Gold coin donation includes afternoon tea. Bookings on 8372 5166.  
6pm @ Walkerville Public Library, 62 Walkerville Tce, Walkerville. Free, including wine and cheese. Bookings on 8344 7714.

birth. In Cambodia, writes Pung, men waited outside, and only after they heard the wahwahwah sounds from inside "knew the whole messy business was over and they could find out whether the child had the desired dangly bits or not".

The Chinese desire for a boy child is encapsulated in a Cambodian saying that gave Pung the name for her book: "A girl is like white cotton wool - once dirtied it can never be clean again. A boy is like a gem - the more you polish it the more it shines."

Released last year by independent Melbourne imprint Black Inc, the book has been warmly received by both readers and critics, reprinted twice and earlier this year won for Pung Newcomer of the Year at the Australian Book Industry Awards. It is being read in schools around the country and is the September selection for The Advertiser Big Book Club.

Pung describes *Unpolished Gem* as a distinctly Australian book in that it celebrates small successes rather than grand achieve-

ments. "There's also a particular migrant narrative where you struggle a lot to reach this thing called success in the end, and success is two and a half pages," she says.

"I wanted to focus on the little idiosyncracies of migrants, the small steps, the small successes - getting on elevators, turning on tap water. They're not the stories that are usually written about migrants because people want a grander narrative, one with fireworks at the end."

Despite being born minus "the desired dangly bits", Pung's success has been the stuff of every migrant parent's dreams. She works as a lawyer in the public service, tutors at a Melbourne University college, contributes articles to *The Monthly* and is working on a play.

These successes are barely hinted at in *Unpolished Gem*. Instead, we read of a childhood where quiet moments reading her beloved books had to be snatched from a busy round of child-minding responsibilities, and,

later, helping out in her family's electrical store. We read of a mother who worked late into the night making jewellery, and of her struggle to adapt when she was forced to give it up due to ill health.

"I've had older women, not necessarily migrants, who've said those were the best parts of the book, that they had had the same experience when their children grew up and went to university," Pung says.

From her early childhood in the constant care of her grandmother, we read of a little girl who quickly learns that she's a pawn in the power struggles between her mother and her grandmother, the family matriarch who literally controlled the purse strings.

Accused by her mother of being a "word-spreader", the young Alice grows up "losing her words", the Chinese language that binds her to a mother and grandmother who never master English.

"I have a western accent when I speak Chinese but I'm still very Asian in culture." For this, she thanks her grandmother.

"She was a very important link to our culture. You can grow up in Australia without having much culture at all if you don't have someone from an older generation. My grandmother came from China, where there was a huge cultural heritage. That was where it came from and it was very important for me to grow up with that, knowing that history."

So strong are those Chinese values that Pung is content to combine her writing life with her career as a lawyer.

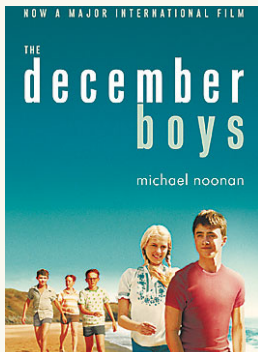
"I'm happy to be both," she says. "Having parents who came from a terrible holocaust, I do value security, I know what it's like to have no security and to be poor. It's not a lifestyle choice, it's a very practical choice."

## Footnote By DEBORAH BOGLE



### FINE FELLOW

Michael Gerard Bauer's sequel to his much-loved *Don't Call Me Ishmael* was launched in Adelaide by Katharine England last week. *Ishmael and the Return of the Dugongs*, published by local imprint Omnibus Books, is Bauer's third book for young adults. He's in Adelaide as a May Gibbs Fellow, staying at the May Gibbs Trust's studio in Norwood. Next month, the studio will be the temporary home



of NSW writer Libby Gleeson, whose *Amy & Louis* was this year's CBC early childhood Book of the Year.

### WIZARD IDEA

We're seeing even more of Daniel Radcliffe. UQP has published a new edition of *The December Boys*, by Michael Noonan, with Radcliffe (wearing a shirt this time) on the cover in a scene from the film which was shot on Kangaroo Island.

## Books & Coffee...

Meet and chat with Pam Smith, editor of

**Valleys of Stone:**

*The Archaeology of the Adelaide Hills*

**October 4** at 7.30pm at Mostly Books

Tickets \$7 per person, bookings essential.

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