God of small things

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

When her mother received a telegram that the family had arrived from Hong Kong, eight-year-old Alice Pung was under the bedclothes. (wearing a shirt this time) on the cover of Unpolished Gem. (Black Inc., $34.95).

If her grandmother, the family matriarch who lived in China, where there was a country that are so taken for granted! It is a country where no one walks like they do in our country.

So strong are those Chinese values that Pung describes Unpolished Gem as a distinctly Australian book in that it celebrates small successes rather than grand achievements.

Later, helping out in her family’s electrical business. 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.

“Have you ever been invited to 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 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 Katherine 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.

In her words

Extract from Unpolished Gem, by Alice Pung

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 probing 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.

The month

The Advertiser The Big Book Club Literary Event

1.30pm @ Goodwood Library, 101 Goodwood Road, Goodwood. Gold coin donations welcome. Bookings on 8372 5166.

6pm @ Walkerville Public Library, 62 Walkerville Tce, Walkerville. Free, including wine and cheese. Bookings on 8344 7714.

The Advertiser

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