

Teachers' Notes  
Written by Pam Macintyre

## *Unpolished Gem* by Alice Pung

*'Migrant literature usually starts with people suffering a lot and then they come to Australia or America or Canada and they make it big. That is supposed to be the end of their suffering. My book doesn't tell it like that; it tells it as it is for me and my family... When we came here, my family were in awe of everything, every little thing was incredible, like a wonderland, but the more you aspire towards being white middle class, the more you suffer internally.'* Alice Pung The Age Sept 3 2006.

Beginning in the 1980s, *Unpolished Gem* is a beautifully written, painful search for identity between two cultures, but is also very funny and life affirming. Unlike many other stories of immigration this one does not finish once successful settlement is achieved, but takes a longitudinal view – we follow Agheare/Alice from birth to university and through the conflicts that arise once the initial appeal of a more affluent society has worn off. In this the book is like An Na's *A Step from Heaven*, a powerful story of a Korean family's struggle in the United States. For a mainstream Australian reader, *Unpolished Gem* allows entrée into a different way of looking at a lot of what is taken for granted, and also is a challenging view of mainstream society, its values and attitudes towards newcomers.

It is a delightful book whose witty style will ensure wide appeal. Beneath the light is plenty of dark and Alice's resilient journey is remarkable. Pung writes in a style that captures the idiom of Australian speech along with lyricism, as she documents her family's integration into Australian society, and her personal journey. Touching, funny and vivid, this shifts the reader between cultures – the ethnic Chinese/Cambodian diaspora in Melbourne, and the former life of her parents and grandparents in Phnom Penh. On one level it is to be read for the absolute pleasure to be taken in the writing – lively, rich, visual, powerful and moving, as well as for its portrayal of one, particular, sharply caught Australia.

The author has constructed the story of her family in Australia (with flashbacks to earlier lives in Cambodia and Vietnam) in distinct parts, each representing a stage in their lives and hers. In addition, there is a prologue and epilogue. It is worth taking about what these 'parentheses' that open and close the narrative, tell us about Alice.

### **Prologue**

Talk about its purpose and function, such as perhaps the contrasts that are in the opening scene in the market and the previous lives in Vietnam, and its powerful scene setting.

## Part 1

This section documents Alice's arrival and her family history. While the family has lived through the horrors of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, there is no concentration on the horrors of that regime or suffering, only the occasional reference. None of the horrors are played out (eg '*Four years in Cambodia under Pol Pot... and your father emerged looking like a brown skeleton*' p112).

- Discuss why the author (reflecting her family values perhaps) chooses not to evoke the tragedies or play on our sympathies.
- While there are unique aspects of life that are peculiar to any family, especially one confronting a completely different culture and society, some childhood experiences are universal, such as Alice's humiliation on p54, and the need to be the same as everyone else.

There are also poignant (such as sleeping on top of the sheets, page 13) and hilarious misunderstandings (as with Good-O on pages 11-12). These are important episodes that build a picture of new arrivals, and Pung is funny but not mocking. Probably a lot of analysis of this book will involve the writing – just how well told it is – and what it reveals about its author.

## Part 11

This section is broadly about kindergarten, the arrival of her maternal grandparents, establishing the family business, Alice at school, and the move to a new house. It builds up a rich picture of the suburb and of business practices that operate outside the supports and regulations of officialdom.

- p67 Ideas of making money – stealing from the big stores – and selling cheap – the idea of supporting small business. It has a certain moral justification – or does it? Consider how cleverly Mr Pung deals with the situation.
- p67 Why is the family worried about the mother being an outworker? – Consider the nature of the work and her persistence, Alice's description of her as a business woman.

## Part 111

This section marks the next stage in the family's settlement into Australia, including the new house, just a decade after the arrival in Melbourne and the real shifts in their perceptions of themselves, but also some nearly irreconcilable tensions.

- This section could be entitled (ironically?) '*The Great Australian Dream*' (pp127). Discuss what is the 'great Australian dream'?
- There are clear markers of the move 'up' in the world, such as sending the clothes to the Brotherhood (pp128-9). Consider the layers of meaning in '*Gone now were the days where a one-dollar plastic brown vinyl coat was a birthday present from the government*'.
- p129 Consider the reactions to the new arrivals – pity, resentment, embarrassment and envy. Talk about these mixed emotions. Is it similar for all immigrants do you think? What has the family lost in the 10 years?
- p130 – importance of not looking '*too peasanty*'. Why is this? What has changed?

- p136 discuss the pressures on the children of the workers. '*...and when you are a child with parents killing themselves with dangerous chemicals just so you can live a comfortable life, there is no comfort within*'. This is powerful. Consider how it is playing out in Alice's life.
- p147 '*They were living the dream lives of the rich and idle on Phnom Penh yet...they didn't know to live this life of luxury and loneliness...they did not know to be idle without guilt...*'. Discuss the implications and the tragedy of this and how Pung's capturing of it so simply is so evocative.
- Read aloud, or have students read aloud the women's conversation on pp148-9 (much of this book would make for wonderful readers' theatre). What are the reactions to what the women are saying? What are the meanings behind the words themselves?
- You need to be able to hear the humour in the conversation about imagining themselves in a nursing home '*Eating their food, their cheeses and other vomity things*' – Alice calls it '*nursing-home nausea*'. It also makes us think about the nature of nursing homes too, how we position the elderly, doesn't it?
- p150 is particularly poignant when the relationship between Alice and her mother begins to fall apart. What is happening here and what has caused it?
- p152 describes the room that is saved for visitors. Isn't this just like 'the good room' in Kath and Kim?
- Life is becoming more difficult for Alice and her mother, rather than easier. P153 her mother gives up work because of her health but she is unhappy and is diagnosed with depression. Alice is seventeen now and trying to look after younger ones and finish school. What has happened to the 'Australian Dream'?
- p158 Alice's mother goes back to work and Alice does the shopping, but she buys no Chinese food. Why?

## Part 1V

This section marks time when loss, dislocation, living across two worlds, trying to live up to everyone's expectations precipitates a crisis for Alice.

- p170 Her grandmother's stroke marks another shift for Agheare. Do you agree that her relationship with her grandmother was more important than her relationship with her mother? That Granny was more Agheare's mother?
- p171 '*Old people...would see things differently, making a difference in whatever way they could, without being afraid of looking foolish*'. Do you agree that old age can be liberating? Consider your family members.
- p207 Alice finally gets herself back. She and her mother find their place separately and together, after much struggle. Think of events in your life when you have felt upheaval, disconnection, upset. How did you reconnect with life?

## Part V

This is about Alice at university and her relationship with a '*white ghost boy*' and exposes further cultural divides that are difficult to breach even when there are the best of intentions on both sides.

- How much are any of us willing to give up in terms of our values and views of the world to accommodate others?

The following are some aspects of culture that might be worth examining – for the world view that underscores them:

- Alice has to be home before dark at an age in Australia when you are considered to be an adult. Talk about what is the motivation. Is it control or is it care?
- Alice's parents aspire for her and see girls as capable as boys academically.
- p211 Many cultures have arranged marriages, rather than 'self-selection'. Again talk about the differences and what it implies in terms of what society values?
- p212 *'My parents abhorred anything that reminded them we would grow up yellow...'* Why? What is happening here?
- p214 Alice describes *'banana children' – yellow on the outside but believed they could be completely white inside'*. Her grandmother warns her that *'those children grew up to become sour, crumple-faced lemons'*. Discuss reasons for this. It is complex isn't it and says something about the mainstream society?
- p219 Alice examines everyone and finds it hard to accept that her white boyfriend likes her for herself. What do you think are his motives?
- p 230 Agheare is conscious of her *'exoticism'* and that she thinks too much – reads into everything motives that might not exist. Is it because she is afraid?
- p222 Alice thinks she is his *'third world experience or something'* that he, an Asian studies student is drawn to the Asian experience. Or, because - as she says - she doesn't get to choose for herself very often?
- p246 The following is a quote worth talking about! *'Why were white people so proud of their chop-stick-wielding skills instead of seeing the abysmally low standards we set for them?'*
- p246-7 The dinner with Michael and the family is beautiful, understated writing –we readers get strong images, the motivations on both sides and Alice's propensity to always interpret the actions and motives of others. Do you think she is always correct? How does her commentating affect how you read the book, and how react to the various people in it?
- p249 *'I wondered what was worse, being supported by your husband or supporting him'*. Argue both sides, or debate it.
- Discuss: *'in fact white people probably thought that we were self-sufficient, hard-working heroes from Hanoi or Hunan...'*

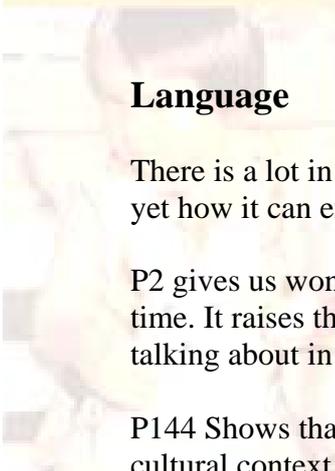
## Epilogue

Discuss the significance of the Easter egg episode.

- What is concluded, accepted?
- What light does it shed on Alice in Unpolished Gem?

## Outworkers

- p139 – why does the Australian government allow this and allow people to be exploited?
- What do you think about it being left to market forces and honour?



## Language

There is a lot in this book about how powerful language can be, how adaptable, and yet how it can exclude and divide.

P2 gives us wonderful examples of one of the ‘Englishes’ that are evolving all the time. It raises the issue of the primary aim of language as functional. This is worth talking about in terms of the difference between oral and written language too.

P144 Shows that language is not just a matter of the words but the importance of the cultural context in which language is embedded and which shapes it.

## Sayings

There are also some wonderful sayings: Here is one to start you off:

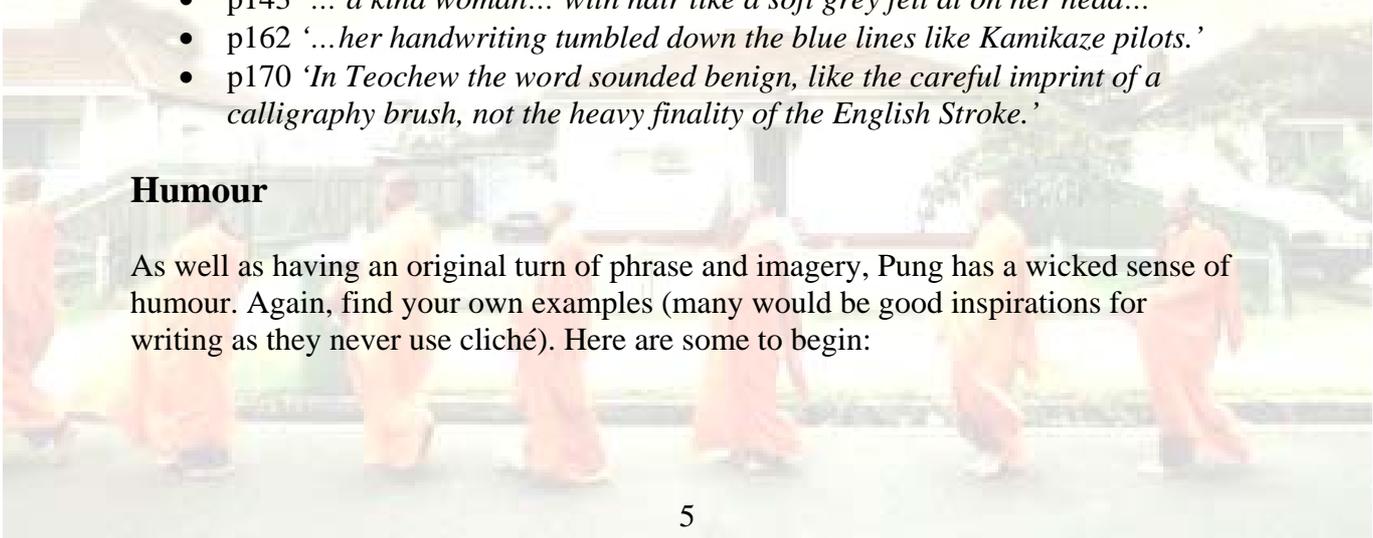
- P43 *‘After making me lose so much face you might as well paint a new pair of eyes on my neck’* says Alice’s grandfather.

## Vivid writing

Pung’s style is captivating, fresh and provides much pleasure in the reading. She creates strong word pictures.

Choose your favourites. Here are some from the first few pages.

- p2 *‘woman with Maggi-noodle curls.’*
- p7 *‘all went to bed with clothes-hangers shoved in their mouths.’*
- p10 *‘My father...growing larger and larger as he approaches the top with a smirk pasted on his face, like a slow zoom in a cheesy Chinese film.’*
- p11 *‘She thinks about the ones back home who are unprocessed and waiting to be processed, unlike the meat that is stacked in tins of twelve in front of her.’*
- p13 *‘I have a clump of black hair plastered to my head like a Beatle circa the early 60s.’*
- p21 *‘my grandmother is a brilliant storyteller and conversationalist when she is not attacking people with bones in her words.’*
- p57 *‘I was just festively plump.’*
- p136 *‘a turnip-and-carrot-soup sort of existence.’*
- p143 *‘... a kind woman... with hair like a soft grey felt at on her head...’*
- p162 *‘...her handwriting tumbled down the blue lines like Kamikaze pilots.’*
- p170 *‘In Teochew the word sounded benign, like the careful imprint of a calligraphy brush, not the heavy finality of the English Stroke.’*



## Humour

As well as having an original turn of phrase and imagery, Pung has a wicked sense of humour. Again, find your own examples (many would be good inspirations for writing as they never use cliché). Here are some to begin:

- p63 *'I was Chinese Ronald McDonald, minus the Happy Times'. And later. 'What do you think you're doing in the car?' cried my mother. 'Fermenting? Get out now.'*
- p231 *'Going out with him would transform me into Woody Allen with a black wig.'*
- p233 Mao-Bin U. *'Their pronunciation made the place sound like a shonky university in China for discarded communists...'*
- p235 *'A few more outdoor dates and Jim's Mowing would be out of business.'*

## Australian and Western Culture

While Pung tells us in the final pages that she has only lived in Melbourne, in one suburb basically, she has absorbed an extraordinary amount of Australian idiom and Western culture from the popular to the high. Where has this huge amount of knowledge come from?

- p234 *'I pictured Balaclava as a place full of thugs and Box Hill as full of packing crates'*. It would be fun to do some other place name associations – lateral thinking and creativity.
- p234 What is the Tower of Babel? Where does it come from? Perhaps relate it to the recent film Babel which also takes language/cultural barriers to communication as a theme.
- p20 Why does Australian society instil in the Pungs that to 'assimilate' and not stand out they must not carry over old habits, but reject the past?

## Boyfriends

- p100 At age 15 Alice says *'All we wanted was someone to go to the movies with, to talk to when tormented by adolescent angst, and to show off to our friends'*. Do you agree with this? What would say the purpose of a boyfriend is?
- p100 *'All a fifteen-year-old boy wants is to receive affirmation from a girl, and perhaps something more if he is lucky...'* Do you agree?

## Alice's adolescent reading

- p95 Dolly fiction – never found herself in the books. How important is it to find yourself reflected in books you read? Judy Blume – what she read when she was thirteen. Do a reading biography of your own.
- p96 Movies *Stand by Me* and *Dead Poets Society* – watch them.
- P97 Alice writes humorously about the mismatch of fiction and life. *Dream Lover* and *Proletarian Princess* – who did you imagine yourself to be, or want to be?

## School

- p143 *'Migrants don't assimilate'* I was told by classmates in politics class. *'They all come here and stick together, and don't bother to learn the language.'* Is that how you see it?

- p143 *'One wrong word could mean being found out for the philistine that I was'*. What does she mean here?
- p174 In the discussion of gods at school, Alice is uncertain whether she is being laughed at or with. What do you think?
- p175 She describes the disjunction between the suffering in King Lear and the madness of her grandmother. School tells her real suffering is in Shakespeare not her grandmother: *'the universality of human experience accessible only to erudite people who could read it'*. This is when everything is starting to be problematic for her. Why do you think that Alice reaches this strange position?
- p177 is very telling. We see Alice's life as an outsider at school, and the hypocrisy in the privileged life of the kids there. What do you think about the contrast between living the tough life and the grammar boys?
- p186 Another confronting event is the valedictory dinner *'We were on the only "ethnically-enhanced" table... Indian, Vietnamese, Russian...But that night our parents realised ...that their children were Watchers, just as they were...that we did not talk to the beautiful people. It must have hit them hard that we were ...not fitting in'*. Who decides who is important, valuable in society? Is it all about externals? Money? Position? Power? Celebrity? Is there no value in modest lives well lived?
- There is lots to talk about here – the former lives of the Chinese and what they have endured and achieved as against an affluent society perpetuating itself.
- p187 *'We may have been the dull people with no time, privacy or glamour, but we had our fierce pride.'* How important is pride in the face of dismissal by wider society?

## Chinese Cultural Values

This book reveals subtly many aspects of Chinese cultural values which are perhaps modified in an alien country. Talk about any that interest, intrigue or challenge you.

The following are two examples:

- p25 The importance of obeying elders. Is this as important in mainstream society? Was it in the past? Ask parents/grandparents. Why has it changed?
- p82-83 The valuing of sons over daughters. What are the historical and cultural reasons for this?
- Differing values/practices across cultures and families in the classroom could be shared.
- Aesthetics - p17 knick knacks – relative costs – and the exoticising of culture.
- p19 *'Beautiful things need not be expensive'*.

## Story

Storytelling is a fundamental underpinning of this book. It has come about from Alice's dairies – telling her story to herself – her grandmother's stories of the past, the family's stories of life before Australia.

## Grandmother and her stories

A strong, almost larger-than-life character who is obviously dearly loved by Alice is a wonderful storyteller with a turn of phrase to rival Alice's.

- p25 She thanks 'Father Government...like Father Christmas, as if he is a tangible benign white-bearded guru...'
- p32 Is she purely manipulative? Bribing Agheare with lollies and hair ties?
- p40 In Cambodia she showed compassion. Why is she now so tough on her daughter-in-law?
- p43 and p78 This story of her as a communist Chinese in Cambodia, with too many sons reveals much about her strength and stubbornness and why she might be like she is. What do you know about the youthful lives of the elderly in your families?
- p48 'My grandmother was possessed of a form of magic, the magic of words that became movies in the mind'. Alice has absorbed that hasn't she?
- p106 She was an activist in China, and had to flee to Cambodia. P106-107 tells us what she lost and also what an enlightened teacher she was – her discipline – and yet she fell for an older man who was already married.
- p106 She tells Alice to 'Love sensibly'. Is that an oxymoron? Did she? Consider how different this picture is to the woman who eventually lives in Melbourne.
- If you could talk to her, what would you ask her about?

## Mother

- p27 Appears to be essentially unhappy as all her money goes to her mother-in-law and her son is dutiful to her: 'locked in this weather board house with thin walls' – she is treated like a servant. P94 Also she can't ask for household help from children as father wants them to study and be successful. Do you feel empathy for her? What would have been her role in Cambodia?
- p30 She is criticised by the grandmother and is agonisingly aware of her mother in law's emotional claim on Alice, so rejects her to protect herself. Do you agree? This is very painful and insightful.
- p32-33 Alice's mother threatens to abandon Alice and kill herself – abandonment is a great fear of childhood (*Hansel & Gretel*). How did you feel reading this?
- p110-11 Again, Alice goes back to her mother's earlier life which gives us greater insight into her. It was tragic. What do you know about the Killing Fields (research this if necessary)?
- p112 Consider that it was the women who kept things together during the exile, and the impact of war and displacement on the social order.
- p113 The parents as courting couple – they were young and lively.
- p140 An outsider would see the options. Why can't Alice's mother?
- p143 She is gradually becoming isolated because of her lack of English even within the family. Imagine how hard that must have been for her.
- p205 But she has enormous strength of character and persistence and turns around her life. 'My mother seemed to know the art of selling better than we who had been educated here, we who were sent to expensive corporate training workshops in the Head Office...My mother could identify with the new migrants, even those from far-off countries like Sudan and Ethiopia.'

And yet she is full of contradictions.

- p242 *'There was no way she could understand an alien, let alone an alien her own daughter had chosen. My mother saw the differences as insurmountable.'* Does Alice? Is that the problem?
- p243-4 *'There was a simplicity about my mother's face, a stillness about her stretched-straight mouth and eyes... She had one of those faces that hid nothing... You knew she was only lonely, and frightened, scared of a potential son-in-law who spoke a language she couldn't understand.'* Can Alice now view her mother more objectively than when she was younger? Why does this change?

## Agheare/Alice

There is no doubt that from the very beginning, this is a special child with keen observational powers and memory, a bright inquiring, imaginative and perceptive mind and highly developed narrative skills. Consider what she remembers, or what she chooses to recall:

- p31 Alice becomes an informant at four. *'I discover that being good means just being good to the person who is telling you to be good.'* Do you think she thought this at four? Could articulate it? Or is it an understanding in hindsight?
- p32 and p34 She is told by her mother that she is evil. Do you think Alice is loved? Or is she simply the meat in the sandwich of the rivalry between her mother and grandmother?
- She loses her childhood to the family – having to look after the babies while her mother is ill during the day and works all night. Is this exploitation or her duty?
- p86 From the time she was nine she received only warnings, never praise. How would you feel in a similar situation?
- p88 Alice is accused of brain damaging her sister who fell off the bed. She then imagines how she could kill herself. This is an example of writing that is worth perusing closely. It is a matter-of-fact childish imagining on one level, but with a darker, more serious aspect. Even in this she is witty: *'meet my Maker through the Oleander plant portal'*. Is humour Alice's protection against much unhappiness? Does seeing the funny side protect her in any way? Or is it her defence mechanism? Discuss.
- p92 She must be an example to the younger children – large load of responsibility.
- p136 Why are there only two choices for her – a doctor or lawyer?
- p142 *'I was running out of words'* is how Alice describes the loss of her Chinese. What are the implications of losing her first language?
- p162 Alice's imaginative games with her siblings, bring to mind Jan Mark's *Nothing to Be Afraid Of*. Some readers might like to read it.
- p177 describes Alice's collapse, her sense of living a false life – not knowing who she is – what is real – culture of the west or the life of her family and its culture. The sense of disconnection is potently evoked in images of death – *'false skin on my face ... rubber death mask... a funeral in my brain'* (and even here humour – *'and we hadn't even studied Emily Dickinson yet'*).

- p193 The death of her grandmother is deeply felt: *'She asserted my existence before I knew I had one ...and she told me my childhood.'* What does that last phrase mean?
- p198 After her very dark time, Alice takes control again, through the simplest things. Is that what life is really about? The simplest things rather than the 'big' things? Is that where we find meaning and purpose?
- p200 Alice gets outstanding results and this releases her from her malaise. Why? How? It seems to revive her (healthy?) cynicism: *'Onwards toward the Great Australian dream. You can pass go. You can collect \$2000. You will be going to university.'*

There is the Alice that she gives to us on the page, but there is also the Alice that we glean through the writing – her diaries, her storytelling abilities, her artistic skills. This is a story by a master storyteller, an observer and an analyser. Consider that what she sees as her weaknesses (pp 260) are in fact her strengths, and are what makes her such a writer with intuition of the human condition.

Discuss that this is largely the story of women in Alice's family. You might like to compare it with Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* which is also about the relationships between three generations of immigrant women.

## General Discussion

This is a rich book full of perceptions and positions that beg to be explored:

- p35 *'What will I understand? I wonder. Suffering? There are far better things to understand than the inconsolable hardships of life. Constantly sighing and lying and dying – that is what being a Chinese woman means, and I want nothing to do with it.'* Will she change?
- p36 Read aloud the last paragraph and talk about it, especially the image of stories as life blood.
- p15-16 Powerful evocation of the future planned for immigrant children. Do you agree with Alice? Is this your experience?
- p47 *'Yet characters are only fixed through experience, and usually bad experience.'*

Cultural stereotypes:

- p92 *'People always assumed that the digital dexterity of Asians was a genetic trait, some God-given talent. But that was not entirely true. While other kids were glueing icy-pole sticks onto paper plates, Asian kids were attaching eye-hooks to designer skirts because their parents' eyesight was failing'.* Describe an 'Australian' stereotype. Why do we persist with stereotypes? Where do they come from? How do they arise?
- p93 Sewing saves Alice. She hand embroiders the Sportsgirl logo – such is the pressure to conform. It might fun here to look at excerpts from Scott Westerfeld's *So Yesterday*, which looks at pressures on mainstream American adolescents.
- p207 Alice describes her demographic and how it allows her a place, as does being loved: *'Life was finally beginning to feel stable.'*

## Method of telling

This is not a straightforward chronological narrative of the lives of the Pungs. The telling begins in contemporary Australia and then interspersed are the stories of earlier lives of Alice's parents and grandparents. Discuss the effectiveness and purposes of this. How does it help to understand the people and their reactions in and to Australia and Australians?

Consider how cleverly Pung reveals their past lives – not as a history lesson but in terms of the new country, which makes us view our own country anew.

- p10 *'My parents become pioneers navigating a new land'* – evoking the great Australian pioneer mythos, and parodying man's epic journey to the moon – *'Every journey is one small step for Australians, but one giant leap for the Wah-sers'* (p10)

Lives are given to us in snapshots rather than as comprehensive chronologies. Consider what has been chosen to be told and what has been left out.

- What would you choose to record of yours and your family's life? Do you think other family members would choose the same things?

Pung uses a conversational style that invites the reader into an intimate portrayal, but one laced with an appealing, ironical view of the world. For example, Granny calls the little man on the traffic lights Mao Ze Dong man. Find others to share and enjoy.

Write about an event in your life in a straightforward, serious tenor. Now write the same episode from an ironic point of view. What is the effect on you and your attitude to what happened to you? Share both with friends and compare their reactions. Which is the most successful? Why?

## Related Reading

- *First They Killed My Father* and the sequel *Lucky Child* by Luong Ung
- *Mao's Last Dancer* by Li Cunxin
- p135 the film *Farewell My Concubine* (might be R rated), and others by the director
- *A Step from Heaven* by An Na
- The stories Ma told Little Brother – *Monkey* – also an animated television series

