

An interview with Alice Pung

Can you tell us a bit about the background to *Unpolished Gem*?

My story starts in Australia, but the unwritten prelude to *Unpolished Gem* begins in the birthplace of my parents. Described as the ‘jewel of Southeast Asia’ by journalist John Pilger when he visited in the 1960s, Cambodia was a shining post-colonial city filled with chaotic life: French colonial buildings crammed close to loud marketplaces like classy courtesans to their local lovers.

Languages, cultures and religions mixed with the marvels of commerce in a developing country: Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese conducted trade in the capital, Phnom Penh. Buddhists, Christians, and Cham Muslims interacted on a day to day basis. This was the world of my father’s childhood.

Yet Cambodia was also the most bombed country in the world during the 1960s and 70s, by American troops who wanted to prevent the Vietcong from hiding in the jungles along the Thai-Cambodian border. Bombs rained down like curtains on a closing act, and Cambodia was the show that the rest of the world didn’t want to pay to see. More bombs were dropped on my parents’ birthplace than were dropped on Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

Upon returning from his studies in France, a man by the name of Saloth Sar took one look at the country and decided there had to be a revolution. I once read that ‘a desktop is a dangerous place from which to view the world.’ For philosophers this is true, yet it is more true – and dangerous - for deranged political men who put their philosophies in action. Saloth Sar wanted to bring back his country to the period in time when it was at the height of civilisation: that is, the height of the Khmer empire, when the Angkor Wat temples were built.

On April 17, 1975, he marched his army of young peasant soldiers, the Khmer Rouge (‘Red Khmers’) into the city. Like black ants they descended, and forced all the city people into the countryside to work as slave labour. My father survived four years in the Killing Fields. During that time, Saloth Sar became known by the name Pol Pot, and his regime murdered millions of Cambodians.

When those Vietcong the Americans had been so bent on effacing from the earth of Southeast Asia had broken through the Thai-Cambodian border through sheer perseverance, Pol Pot’s regime came to an end. My father walked all the way to neighbouring Vietnam. There, he met my mother again, with whom he had grown up in Cambodia. He said it was love at first sight, although to be honest I think it was actually love at second sight, because being nine years older, he had not paid her much attention when she was a thirteen year-old working in his mother’s plastic bag factory in Phnom Penh.

My mother, likewise, was not impressed when she first met dad. She told me, “your father came out of the Killing Fields so skinny that if he turned around sideways, he would disappear from view.” Yet when this earnest skeletal soul promised to take her to a Western Democratic country, she believed him. They both then paid a people smuggler (which were innocuously called ‘guides’ then) to take them to Thailand. “It

was a three-month honeymoon sleeping under the stars,” dad told us, discreetly omitting the dangers from his narrative – dangers which they fortunately evaded: the robbers, the rapists hiding in the jungles, the landmines.

Eventually, they made it to the Thai refugee camp, where they spent a long, hot year of waiting. “There was not much to do at that camp,” dad says. And that is how I came into existence. I was born in Australia a month after my parents arrived, and dad was so thrilled with his new homeland that he named me Alice, after Lewis Carroll’s protagonist, a girl who finds herself in a Wonderland. He tells people that I was manufactured in Southeast Asia but assembled in Australia. With Chinese parts.

What are some of the themes you dealt with in *Unpolished Gem*?

The title *Unpolished Gem* is derived from an old Chinese Cambodian saying: “A girl is like cotton wool—once she’s dirtied, she can never be clean again. A boy is like a gem—the more you polish it, the brighter it shines.” When I talk to school students about my book, all the girls understand this, because even now we live in a world where the media forces Paris Hilton upon us as a role model. But some of the boys still think that the reference to ‘polishing a gem’ is about wanking.

Tell us about *Growing Up Asian in Australia*

When I was growing up, there were absolutely no books about Asian Australians going through Betty-Freidan-esque nightmares while the rest of popular culture went to the prom. Asians in the Australian sitcom 'Home and Away' must have been starring in the 'Away' part of the show. Early 1980s 'Neighbours' might have been safely ensconced in their embryonic suburban sacs, but my neighbour was a five year old girl who drowned kittens in the backyard. The boys who roamed around our neighbourhood were never the blue-eyed blonde haired heroes of Dolly fiction, but more likely blue haired blonde eyed bottle smashers in the streets. And some of us grew up thinking we were the shonky slant-eyed Yellow Peril.

So the stories in *Growing Up Asian* are meant to set the record straight. Asian Australians have been in Australia since 1810, less than three decades after the first fleet arrived. There are 62 stories in this anthology from famous and not-so-well-known Asian Australians, about what it is like to grow up during different social and political periods in Australian history. I concentrated on the period of ‘growing up’ – because that’s the period where most of life’s ‘first’s happen - and I also wanted the definition of Asian-Australian to be as diverse and inclusive as possible.

I also wanted young Asian Australians to pick up this book and be inspired – I wanted them to know that they did not have to *only* become accountants or doctors to be successful. They could become talented artists, punk rock musicians, Lord Mayors, radio DJs, writers, film directors, comedians, even pig and chicken farmers if they so desired ...

We have writers whose ancestors came from the gold rush days in the 1860s and lived through the White Australia Policy, to more recent arrivals who lived under the era of Multiculturalism. We have writers who are Eurasian, adopted, and migrants. I wanted this anthology to encompass as much diverse insight as possible, so our authors come

from every walk of life. What moved me was the resilience of the writers, their creativity, humour, quirk and insight – sometimes against severe racism, personal illness, familial pressure and pressure from society to conform.

What was the editorial process like for your books?

My editors at Black Inc. are the best editors in the world. Chris and Denise really know how to see the big picture of a manuscript, and give me as much artistic freedom as I need. Above all, Chris, my main editor, is patient—because *Unpolished Gem* took me three and a half years to write. I have never been a full-time writer, and I have always fitted my writing around my life. I don't believe in living the life of a tormented artist. I don't like making others around me miserable with delusions of grandeur. So I write only when I have something to say, and once I have said it, it's said and done. That is why I was never particularly sensitive when we decided to pull out whole chapters of my manuscript. The only thing I am sensitive about are the covers of my books, because I know how much a cover can influence the reader.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am working on some short stories which will hopefully become my next book. I just returned from living in China recently, so now I understand what it is like to be like a fish out of water in a foreign country—but above all, I learned how much kindness there is in the world, too.

When did you first decide you wanted to be a writer? Was it something you had always set your heart on?

When I was younger, I did not yet know how to deal with my feelings, or with the seemingly unending plagues of headlice and scabies I used to get, or with looking after younger siblings while my parents both worked, feeling trapped in a horrible domestic nightmare. I had such low self-esteem, I needed to feel like a winner at something. So I began a *Guinness Book of Records* in at thirteen, where I made myself the world record holder in all the categories: 'Record for the person who has pilfered every single hairstyle Ronald MacDonald has had for the past ten years' (mum made me get a perm to burn off all the head-lice eggs), 'Record for the best Ironing-Board impersonation' (I was flat-chested), and 'Record for the Worst Face in the history of the Universe' (self explanatory). I still have that little notebook tucked away a journal somewhere.

I looked back over my journals when I was eighteen and found them rather hilarious, even though they were unintentionally so. And that was when I decided that I would write a funny book.

I was tired of reading manuals by Asian women on how to feel miserable and oppressed. Young girls - particularly Southeast Asian girls - are socialised not to vocalise any form of anger or annoyance. And girls are not supposed to make fun of themselves because it is meant to do some sort of irrevocable damage to their brittle self-esteem. However, it seemed that Asian women could write countless books on their ten thousand sorrows, and be published, as long as the misery came from the forces of the outside world.

So I was tired of reading Oriental Cinderella stories and migrant narratives of success. Instead of inspiring me, they actually made me feel like an abject failure. *When will I ever accumulate enough suffering to be a real writer?* I wondered. I had defeated no communists/nationalists/evil stepmothers, did not have a seedy past or narcotic addiction, and the only thing I had ever smoked was salmon (in the oven).

Then I thought, damn it, I'm going to write a book about yellow people aspiring to become white middle class! It's not going to start with the struggles of war, but something more ironically Marxist - it would be about a working class family and their petit bourgeois dreams. And damn those who perpetuate the stereotype of the joyless Asian. My characters are going to laugh. So *Unpolished Gem* was begun, a book that was premised on poking fun of my abysmally low, adolescent self-esteem; and a book about my love for my quirky, daggy family.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Footscray, Melbourne, and grew up in a suburb called Braybrook. Braybrook is close to a suburb called Sunshine. Beautiful names for towns filled with factories with chimneys like vertical cigarettes against the sky. I spent a lot of time indoors, growing more and more pasty-faced. That is why I now glow in the dark. Almost.

What kinds of books did you read when you were growing up?

I read lots of John Marsden (Australian young adult writer), Paul Zindel (Canadian), Robert Cormier, Sonya Hartnett, and Lois Lowry as I was growing up. I adored John Marsden for dealing with the difficult and dark feelings of adolescence, and I loved Paul Zindel and Lois Lowry for the humour they imbued in their stories. I loved Amy Tan because she told stories I could relate to, and she was funny and compassionate and warm – just like the author herself, when I saw her at 19 at the Melbourne Writer's Festival. I was at the very back of a packed auditorium – and she said one thing I will never forget: “writing is an act of compassion.”

I also read voraciously and indiscriminately because no one ever censored my reading. The funny thing is that no one ever judges another person for watching a series of ‘bad’ films, yet if you continue to read ‘bad books’ you are meant to have poor taste, and it is supposed to reflect on your personality. When I was fourteen I thought the *Babysitters Club* was literature. Looking back, I am still very fond of Anne M. Martin. Those books never did me any harm. In fact they did me a lot of good.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

Yes! I dedicated my second book *Growing up Asian in Australia* to them: I have a younger brother named Alexander (who is the winking kid on the cover of *Growing Up Asian in Australia*), and two younger sisters Alison and Alina. I love them so much.

As well as being a writer, you also work as a lawyer. Why did you choose to study law?

My father's family used to own a plastic bag factory in Cambodia. During the years of the Killing Fields, the Khmer Rouge did not want to waste bullets to exterminate enemies of the revolution, so they used plastic bags instead. They would tie people's hands behind their backs and seal a bag over their heads and make the entire work collective watch. My father was one of those thousands in the collective who watched. He never let us play with plastic bags or put them anywhere near our faces and when I was growing up, I didn't understand: I thought he was being an unreasonably severe killjoy. It was only when I went to university and learned about the Killing Fields that I realised why my father harboured such fears.

It was only when I was in my late teens that I truly understood the dreams of stability of parents who survived a genocide - their insatiable desire, borne out of pure love, that their children remain secure and safe. Even if that meant the child largely remained between four walls in a concrete house throughout much of her childhood and adolescence. So when I got the marks to get into law school, I jumped at the chance. I just wanted to get out of the feeling of being trapped, of being locked into two neighbourhoods.

My father now runs two electrical appliance stores in Melbourne, and my mother also works there. In fact, I worked there up until very recently. I spent quite a lot of time in the family business. Perhaps that's also how I got a chance to practice law, before any of my friends and colleagues graduated from their degrees - writing employment contracts, going to small claims tribunals, understanding Sales of Goods Acts. When I was sixteen and my classmates were going to after school debating sessions, I was upstairs in my dad's shop helping him write tender submissions to government authorities to procure property for his business. I learned to hide my age very well on paper. Perhaps that's why I work as a solicitor (non-court based lawyer). I spend quite a bit of time thinking things over, and I am not very good at arguing.

How do you remember your high school experience?

I went to four different secondary schools: I went through the state system, the private religious (Catholic), the state selective system, and finally, to a private Grammar school. They say that knowledge is power - with each successive move of high school, I was also inchoately aware I was moving through different classes, slowly. And I came to realise how class-based the Victorian system of education is - there was a world of difference between my first school and my last. The students with whom I went to school in Footscray Girls Secondary College are, on the whole, now in very different places than my classmates at my Grammar school.

What advice do you have for students facing Year Twelve?

It is not the end of the world. Do your best for yourself. Do your best to help others. Be grateful for kind and compassionate teachers. Perhaps try to get into a routine of some sort.

And on the days you feel like you can't crawl out of bed and feral creatures are clawing at your solar plexus, remember – feelings rise, but they then also subside. They ebb and flow, and if you keep on keeping on, you will get through it. What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger – or at least, helps you become a better storyteller!

For anyone dreaming of becoming a writer, what's the most important piece of advice you have to give?

Just do it. Never think of yourself as a proper noun, a 'writer', but a verb. Just write. That way, you are there for the *experience* of writing, and not the title attached to being a 'writer.' Be interested in other people on a human level, but also don't be afraid of solitude. Above all, don't give up – never give up.