

Unpolished Gem

Juliette Hughes, Reviewer
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Juliette Hughes finds pain and comedy running through Alice Pung's migrant story.

Author

Alice Pung

Genre

Memoir

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Black Inc

RRP

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THIS IS A MEMOIR SO vivid that images from it linger behind your eyelids - the pig's blood jelly that Alice Pung's father remembers wistfully; the festive paper chains made of cut-up Target catalogues; the fate of the chocolate eggs that the seven-year-old Alice hoards in a drawer.

The book begins as the ethnic Chinese Pung family arrive in Australia from Cambodia, fleeing the Khmer Rouge. Immigrants to this country have a vast range of stories to tell but their have a more complex narrative formed by the experience of life as links between the old country and the new.

Over time various ethnic groups have arrived and congregated in tight-knit communities for a while: Irish, Italian, Greek and, of course, Anglo Saxon. All have merged into the dominant Australian culture; significantly all have provided top footballers, politicians, chefs and writers, the first being a more reliable indicator of cultural integration than the last two. But Chinese Australians and other East Asians have been more inclined towards business and medicine than footy. However admirable their achievements, it takes a book like this to help bridge the wider Australian culture and the old ways.

Alice Pung is the classic migrant child whose immersion in two cultures makes her an interpreter. She is a go-between in other ways; her paternal grandmother and mother use her quite ruthlessly:

"They keep all these secrets and tell them to four-year-olds who cannot possibly understand the complicated channels of hatred . . . And so I was doomed, early on, to be a word-spreader."

The stories are full of pain but there is a rich vein of comedy running through *Unpolished Gem*. Pung sees her family with Australian eyes and portrays them often as quaint. It's a position of privilege - certainly no one else could do this without risking prejudiced cultural stereotypes. Yet many of the Asian/migrant stereotypes are there: the family sets up a small business; her mother is an outworker, putting enormous pressure on the young Alice to look after her younger siblings; Alice is under massive pressure later on to excel at school.

Pung's sense of what it is to be a Chinese woman is often disturbing: "Constantly sighing and lying and dying - that is what being a Chinese woman means, and I want nothing to do with it."

Western notional female equality entices her. As a teenager she engages in the usual subterfuges in order to go to parties and feel comfortable with her friends. But she does not go as far as they do: she has a strong sense of what can be tolerated by both the cultures she inhabits, even as she loses the ability to think in Chinese.

She embraces English language as only a fiercely intelligent and industrious person can. Pung's school work is the way out of part of her dilemma as a bicultural being. She wants to escape the fate of being a married woman with no



Alice Pung's memoir is a potent testament of what being an immigrant Australian means to the people who come here to find something better than what they have left behind.

future and no interests of her own, and the family, while holding traditional expectations of her, also wish her to be a successful lawyer. Her mother is obviously desperately unhappy with her lot as a married woman. Her outwork continues long after it is no longer needed - being just a housewife is intolerable.

Pung's grandmother had her own battles against gender stereotyping in Cambodia, valuing and loving two baby daughters who died. She's much kinder to Alice than the girl's mother, whose chronic lack of emotional serenity makes her harsh.

Under such circumstances it is not surprising that Alice starts to break down. She starts to go mad in year 12 (reading *King Lear* can be risky), in ways that recall the young Vera Brittain in *Testament of Youth*. Pung has to be medicated by a doctor who spans the cultures and understands the pressures. Later she holds back from her first relationship with a young Australian man; despite his benign goodwill, her drive and her fears are too great.

These are women with no time for joy luck clubs and mahjong. This is a potent testament of what being an immigrant Australian means to the people who come here to find something better than what they have left behind.

***Unpolished Gem* will be launched by Helen Garner at 3.30pm today at the Age Melbourne Writers' Festival.**

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