

ALICE PUNG

Refugee and Asylum Seeker Australian Literature

Class grouping:
Time:

Whole Class and pairs/small groups
60-90 Minutes

Purpose:

The purpose of this activity is to introduce students to the context of Alice Pung's life as an Asian growing up in Melbourne's western suburbs. Students should be familiarised with Pol Pot and the Cambodian Genocide prior to visiting the *Her Place* exhibition. Specifically, students will contemplate their existing knowledge about Australia's migrant history and culture, and the invaluable role Alice has played as an Asian writer living in Australia.

The activities in this resource work well if you are able to provide pairs, or small groups, with laptops with access to the internet. This resource is inquiry based and provides students with leading questions for discovery and discussion.

Activities:

- 1. Basic comprehension**
- 2. Group/Class discussion**
- 3. Research task**

**Preparation
and Materials:**

Print a copy of the reading and questions attached for this lesson

Ensure student have access to electronic devices with internet

Alice Pung, b. 1981

Original introduction to *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, edited by Alice Pung.

Academics and students might be interested in the history of Asian-Australians, but we as a popular culture are perhaps not ready. And the thing I wanted to accomplish with this book – first and foremost – was to infiltrate our popular culture – our common culture, our everyday culture – with stories about how integral Asian-Australians are to our national identity. This meant getting the books into the mainstream bookstores.

So what was it like for a yellow or brown person growing up in a country where ‘Advance Australia Fair’ was taken literally to mean ‘advance, pale-faced patriots,’ while those of a different colour should be effaced? In secondary school, the only representations I saw of our early Asian settlers – people with faces like my relatives – were in illustrations as pigtailed caricatured demons or hanging dead from trees in the goldfields; even though the early pre-mining-boom Chinese were known to be carpenters, merchants and free-settler farmers.

Throughout Australian literary history, Asians have often been written about by outsiders, as outsiders. Our outside identity oscillates between being a grave threat to white nationhood and being the obedient racial group least likely to offend, depending on the political climate. In 1996, a fiery-headed maiden declared in parliament that we were in danger of being ‘swamped by Asians,’ who ‘have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.’ We were back to being the Peril again.

Alice was born in Footscray, Victoria, a month after her parents, Kuan and Kien, arrived in Australia. Alice’s father, Kuan – a survivor of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime – named her after Lewis Carroll’s character because, after surviving the Killing Fields, he thought Australia was a wonderland.

Alice Pung’s first book, *Unpolished Gem*, is an Australian bestseller that won the Australian Book Industry Newcomer of the Year Award. Alice’s next book, *Her Father’s Daughter*, won the Western Australia Premier’s Award for Non-Fiction and was shortlisted for the Victorian and NSW Premiers’ Literary Awards and the Queensland Literary Awards. Alice’s latest book, *Laurinda*, has been shortlisted for numerous awards.

Alice also edited the collection *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, and her writing has appeared in *The Monthly*, *The Age*, *The Best Australian Stories* and *The Best Australian Essays*. Her *Meet Marly* children’s books, from the *Our Australian Girl* series, were published in 2015. Marly is a 10-year-old girl growing up in Sunshine, Victoria, in 1983. Based on Alice’s own experiences as a child in the western suburbs of Melbourne, the Marly series explores what life was like for many refugee kids adapting to new circumstances.

Alice is a qualified lawyer and still works as a legal researcher in the area of minimum wages and pay equity.

Alice's books are studied in secondary schools and universities in Australia as well as around the world. She has lectured at universities and schools all around Australia and overseas, and taught writing workshops to students from the ages of eight to 80.

<https://www.alicepung.com/about-1/>

INTERVIEW WITH LAURA GORDON:

Growing up, the only kind of literature that involved people who were from my kind of cultural background seemed to be 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 not going to start with the struggles of war, but something more 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.

In many ways, Unpolished Gem is a reflection of the Great Australian Dream - moving between classes, building something concrete (a house) out of nothing, and ensuring the next generation are better educated. From my own experience, refugees and migrants who can't read or write are denied access to the power that having a voice accords a person in society. In many respects, they don't need to cultivate their voices because supermarkets have self-checkouts now, and you can drive with a GPS. But a migrant woman who has no communication to the outside society becomes overly dependent on her children and husband, perhaps placing more pressure on them for her overall happiness and to alleviate the loneliness.

“My characters are going to laugh.” – Alice Pung

Activity 1

Using the written information, answer the following comprehension questions:

1. Who was Alice named after and why?
2. How many adult books has she written and what were they called?
3. What was the Meet Marley series about?
4. Why can migrant women become isolated in Australia?

Activity 2

Divide students into groups to discuss the following questions and share thoughts as a class:

1. Why do you think Alice wanted to read stories written by Asian Australians rather than white Australians?
2. How does Alice feel about refugees and migrants in Australia?
3. What does Alice mean by 'national identity'?

Activity 3

Using your knowledge and electronic devices, answer the following questions. Students may work in groups, pairs or individually. Share answers as a class.

1. In which years did the Cambodian Genocide occur?
2. Who was Pol Pot and what was the Khmer Rouge?
3. Approximately, how many Cambodians were murdered during the genocide?
4. What kinds of people were considered 'enemies' and targeted by the Khmer Rouge for arrest and torture, and murdered?
5. What were the Killing Fields?
6. Find a photograph of torture facility S21 and the Killing Fields.

