

Black Inc. Teaching Resources

TITLE: Laurinda

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ISBN: 9781863956925

PRICE: \$19.99

RELEASE DATE: November 2014

SUBJECT: English

Suitable for middle and senior secondary

Alice Pung reflects on writing her new novel Laurinda.

When you write a book set in an all girls' private school, the immediate and inevitable question everyone asks (even before the book's publication) is always: which private school is it? When I reply that Laurinda Ladies College is entirely fictional, often I see a look of amused disbelief in their faces before they start going through all the private girls' schools beginning with 'L'! This reaction fascinates me as an author, because the other setting of the book, the suburb of Stanley, is based on a real suburb, and no one ever asks me about this.

I grew up in Braybrook, a factory town filled with broken cars in front lawns and the sort of socio-economic status where those who have the least are fat because the local shopping strip might sell all the latest chip varieties, but have barely any vegetables. By the time you're thirty, you're lucky to have all your teeth. There are families who have been on welfare for two or three generations, and there are also refugee migrants who don't see daylight most of the week because they are in their garages sewing.

My book's protagonist is a 15-year-old girl named Lucy Lam who wins a scholarship to Laurinda. If I had kept Lucy in her place and set my story in the sort of school where it is so rough that you'll find syringes in the swimming pools and teachers getting physically harassed, no one would bat an eyelid. Gritty, I



suppose it would be called. But no one would ask, ooh, is this xyz State school? This is because sadly, we accept brutal realities of state schools. If Laurinda had instead been Stanley High (again, fictional), state school teachers might even feel relieved that their plight had been highlighted – the lack of resources and pastoral care, and poor pay. But *Laurinda* is not a book about the public versus private system of education, nor a book that attacks either.

I went to five different high schools when I was growing up – almost a new change every year! From state, to Catholic, to private grammar school, to state selective, from single-sex to co-educational: I have been through the entire spectrum. Because I am more inclined to introversion, and because when I arrived at each school certain friendship groups had already been cemented, I became a quiet witness. I observed how in every school, certain students were paradoxically popular but universally disliked, how stoic some teachers were in the face of great classroom challenges, and how sometimes those in positions of power were real bullies.

What has always fascinated me is how institutions shape an individual, and how some powerful institutions retain their power through the sort of

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cloistered defensiveness that results in their staff being immediately suspicious that *Laurinda* must be about their school! As an artist and writer, this sort of institutional censorship is something I don't understand. Institutions that are running well run transparently, and young adults are the same everywhere. I know because I have worked with them for a decade. In every school I have visited, if the school is truly committed to bringing out the best in their students, I will be asked some of the most insightful, deep and life-affirming questions.

But if the welfare of the student is secondary to the rhetoric of 'success' in a school, then students will stand up with pieces of paper and read out impressive PhD-type questions with three different clauses about the themes of my books. I cannot give genuine responses to such questions (as often I don't understand them myself!) and they are not about receiving genuine answers, but about showing the guest speaker that the school is intelligent, critical, and above all, *impressive*.

Laurinda is about such a school, but with the power notch cranked up to its highest setting. It is a place that cares so much about 'achievement' that it cultivates every student to either be a 'leader' or else a failure, and where a vile culture of bullying is not only condoned, but allowed to thrive. At the pinnacle of power is an unholy trinity called the Cabinet, three illustrious girls who not only keep the other students in check, but work in cahoots with the administration to weed out the 'weaker' teachers. When you cultivate success at all costs, to fill wooden wall plaques with gilt-finished alumni names, then you create a place where students lose perspective. Having worked as a

pastoral care adviser to university students, I'll often encounter beautiful, talented, intelligent and delightful eighteen-year-olds who are on five different types of medication – for anxiety, depression, panic attacks. They've never failed at anything in their lives, yet they constantly feel like failures.

Then I realise – these were once children sent out into the world with enough medals on their blazers to ward off bullet attacks from their more 'ignorant' and feral counterparts from undesirable suburbs! These were students who felt they had to be perfect to be valued, and who were only taught to deal with poverty and fear through the distance of guest speakers during school assemblies. When fear permeates their decisions, they learn to move in smaller and smaller parameters. This is heart-breaking, because these young adults will be future leaders making important decisions on policy – decisions that affect many of my family and friends – and they will determine them from the safety of a public-service desktop!

So I take my students to Footscray for 'stress-relief.' We go to the markets and buy fruit. We walk down the mall. It's no big deal. I don't make a fuss, never point out the differences of the Western suburbs, don't make a 'learning experience' of it. But it is a big deal. They see how lives are lived, quietly or loudly, parallel to their own. This is Lucy's dilemma too, but in the inverse – coming from Stanley but going to Laurinda. This dichotomy is how she discovers her moral compass.

The truth is, students are hungry for guidance about how to cope with adversity, what it means to deal with loss, and what courage means. That's why John Green,

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John Marsden, Sonya Hartnett and Melina Marchetta are so loved. They touch the heart of what teenagers ask themselves all the time – about family, friends, success, failure and faith. These are not ‘adult’ questions about institutional prestige. Through the prism of a quiet observer, these questions are the weighty questions that hopefully, *Laurinda* explores.

Teaching notes

To download complimentary teaching notes for *Laurinda*, *Unpolished Gem*, *Growing up Asian in Australia* and *Her Father’s Daughter*, visit www.blackincbooks.com/teachers

Praise for *Laurinda*:

“Alice Pung totally nails it with *Laurinda*. Funny, horrifying, and sharp as a serpent’s fangs.” – John Marsden

“Pung continues to impress with her nuanced storytelling; *Laurinda* will surely resonate with anyone who remembers the cliquey, hierarchical nature of the playground.” – *The Sunday Age*

About Alice Pung

Alice Pung is the author of *Laurinda*, *Unpolished Gem* and *Her Father’s Daughter* and the editor of the anthology *Growing Up Asian in Australia*. Alice’s work has appeared in the *Monthly*, *Good Weekend*, the *Age*, *The Best Australian Stories* and *Meanjin*.
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About Laura Gordon

Laura Gordon is an experienced secondary English teacher. She currently teaches years 7–12 at St Joseph’s College, Geelong, where she has taught for the past 10 years. She shares her passion for books and reading by creating engaging curriculum and learning activities for the classroom.

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