

# Black Inc. Australian Curriculum Questions

**TITLE:** Laurinda

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Suitable for middle and senior secondary

*Australian Curriculum Questions for Laurinda by Alice Pung.*

*Questions by Laura Gordon.*

## Question 1.

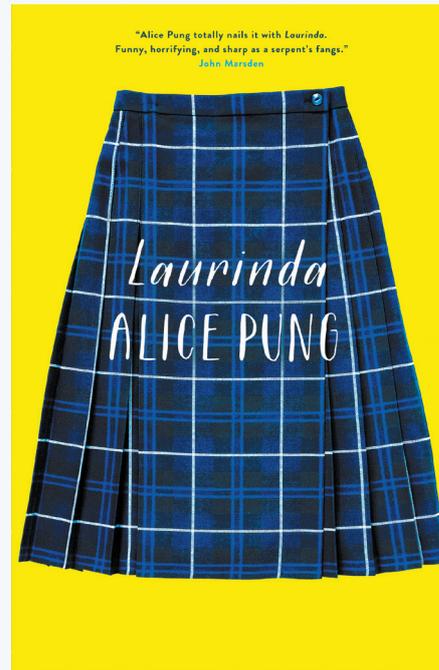
Your previous books have drawn heavily on your own life experience. Where does *Laurinda* sit in the story of your life? Is there any of your own adolescence in the book or is it a story that explores the difficulty most girls experience on their journey to adulthood?

**(Alice Pung):** Growing up, I went to five different high schools, and I have always been fascinated by the way institutions shape individuals. In each new high school I felt like I was a slightly different person – not because anything about me had immediately changed – but because people’s perceptions of me had.

High school is the only time in your life where a large part of your identity is actually shaped by other people. As an adult you can choose your friends, and your time is finite, so of course, you try to only spend time with people who like and affirm you. As a teenager, though, you are forced to fit yourself in amongst 200-1000 other people, who are all with you every day. So I’ve always been interested in how teenagers adapt to this.

## Question 2.

Lucy is a tenacious teenage girl who manages to look inside herself and find the resolve needed to resist the power and manipulation of the Cabinet. Do you think she is a typical teenage girl? How do you think readers will respond to Lucy?



**(AP):** When I wrote the character of Lucy, I was very aware of her voice first and foremost, very certain that the reader would be hearing her thoughts and not her words. She’s what school psychologists would now call a classic introvert, but the fascinating thing is that she was not an introvert at her previous school. It is only coming to Laurinda that she loses her speaking voice.

Lucy’s tenacity is not that she charges into the institution of Laurinda and speaks her mind, but that she silently watches this world unfold to gain understanding of it. Many young adult books stress the importance of belonging to a group, yet Lucy is content to be by herself at school after she recognises that the institution is rotten. When evil exists, we are taught to do something about it – Lucy’s non-participation in the institution is a form of resistance, and I think it’s pretty stoic. You have to have a strong sense of self to choose to be ‘a loner.’

## Question 3.

Tell us a bit about Amber Leslie. Is there anything redeeming about her? Do you think readers will identify with her or just despise her? What happens for those girls reading who may have behaved in similar ways?

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**(AP):** In Amber, Chelsea and Brodie, I wanted to create characters that were so entitled that they didn't even realise how entitled they were. There's the old cliché of the silver spoon, but I didn't want these characters' entitlement to be based on wealth – I wanted it to be based on cultural capital: the handed-down power that exists in our society. Their alumni mothers trained them to appreciate Royal Doulton and institutional loyalty, their fathers are powerful men and their school Laurinda trains them to be 'Leaders of tomorrow'.

So of course they're going to want to 'lead' the school. They feel it's their birthright. And also, being such perfectionists, they feel a duty to weed out the weaker elements of the school: vulnerable teachers, students they feel are not up to scratch. I did not want the Cabinet to be vacuous 'mean girls', but the sort of pressure-cooker girls you would meet at a private school who must be on top of things all the time; and yet whose worlds are so tightly-wound that any threat to their order would ignite them. And I hope readers come away with an understanding that those girls are as much victims of institutional and familial insularity as they are cruel.

#### **Question 4.**

*Laurinda* is not set in the current day where students are consumed by social media and rely on electronic devices for communication. How different do you think life would have been for the girls in your novel if they had mobile phones and online profiles? Was this a deliberate choice to create a situation where the girls had to complete their nastiness face to face, and were willing to?

**(AP):** Yes, I deliberately set the story in the mid-1990s before there was social media and cyberbullying, for three reasons. The first is that young adult readers are the most discerning and astute audience you'll ever have. They can tell a false note a mile away, so if I set the book in contemporary times and got cultural references wrong or tried to 'be with it' in relation to social media, they would know I was trying way too hard.

Second, I wanted the girls to demonstrate their nastiness in person, physically, face to face. There's a certain kind of courage in this – like how soldiers used to fight wars, bayonet to bayonet. They could not hide behind drones.

Finally, I wanted to cement Lucy's outsider status so the reader got a real sense of her complete alienation and disconnection from the school. I wanted the reader to hear her uninterrupted reflections on what this meant, to experience her working things out, thought by thought. This could definitely not be achieved if her inner monologue was constantly interrupted by her Facebook posts or tweets, which are never representative of a person's true state of mind anyhow, just symptomatic of temporary feelings.

#### **Question 5.**

Can you tell us a little about the family dynamics in this novel? On the one hand there is the Lam family who support each other and who fled their home country to provide a safe future for their children. These are people who work hard and dream of a different life for their son and daughter. And then in stark contrast to this is the Leslie family, a wealthy, educated mother and daughter who spend time

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together and share values. But they barely communicate and are often in conflict. What is at play here?

**(AP):** The Lam family treat their daughter like an adult, because back in Vietnam, 15-year-olds were adults. I went to school with kids who'd come to Australia alone as unaccompanied minors from war zones, and had friends who were mothers by 16, or who dropped out of school at that age to sew in factories. The adults around them treated them like adults with adult responsibilities. These kids knew their roots, and they were pretty resilient.

Then on the other side, you have girls who are trained to be 'future leaders', but mollycoddled and treated like hothouse strawberries – bright and lush inside the glass but who would bruise easily in the outside world.

When you tell teenagers that they can achieve anything they want but then start infantilising them, yelling at them in assembly like kindergarteners, dictating when they can literally cross the road, then naturally there will be conflict.

## Question 6.

The role of authority is really interesting in this novel. The way these girls not only feel they can manipulate those in charge of their education, but actually do such nasty things that achieve their goal of having a teacher resign is horrifying. But then the discovery that the principal Mrs Grey is supportive of the Cabinet exposes Lucy, and many readers like her, to the way power can often be corrupt. Tell us about the character of Mrs Grey, her choices, her motivations and ultimately the shift Lucy has toward her by the end of the text. Is Mrs Grey to blame?

**(AP):** I deliberately made Mrs Grey ambiguous like her name. In fact, she was based a little bit on a woman I once knew who was a bully to students and even to parents. Ironically, this was not at a private school, so rest assured my book does not set out to malign private schools! She is now in a high position of authority, so I wanted *Laurinda* to be a realistic exploration of institutional power. Adults are not always rational or kind or fair. Not all adults care for your welfare and mental health over their own career progression, and sometimes, that works out very well for them.

*But*, if you let these kinds of things go, and if your institution has this kind of culture, sooner or later any individual benefit from stepping over other people is eclipsed by the decline of morale and happiness in a place.

## Question 7.

The notion of power and popularity is explored in this text, as it is in many coming-of-age novels. Does power always poison? Do you remember any literary examples from your own reading experience where the popular girl resists the urge to exploit those who she has the capacity to manipulate? Or would that be too unrealistic?

**(AP):** When I was twenty and a student of politics at university, Aung San Suu Kyi wrote something in her book, *Freedom from Fear*, that has always stuck with me. She wrote that power doesn't in itself corrupt. What corrupts is fear – fear of losing that power, fear of being overpowered. So power in itself is neutral. Back at her old school, Lucy's teachers and even Lucy herself had some degree of power, but they didn't use it to lord over their fellow classmates. They used it to

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to lord over their fellow classmates. They used it to effect change and instil hope.

## Question 8.

The use of Linh is an engaging literary device in the novel. The use of the letter cleverly disguises the trick of who Lucy's recipient really is. For the students reading this novel who have aspirations to write meaningful pieces, what can you tell them about the use of a twist or an element of surprise to narrative structure?

**(AP):** I worked very long and hard, with a dozen redrafts, to get that plot twist just right! I knew there was a danger that if it wasn't right, then it would just be a cheap trick instead of adding a layer of extra complexity to the character. So don't just add a twist as a way to be clever – it has to be essential to the plot or to the development of your character in some way.

## Question 9.

The cover of your novel features the tartan kilt of the Laurinda uniform, a symbol of the prestige and tradition of this ladies college. Symbols play a key role in exploring the themes and establishing characters in this text, as they do in many texts. Which of the symbols in *Laurinda* are pertinent to you in the formation of character and the thematic considerations of the text?

**(AP):** The uniform of the private school was a huge symbol for me when a student myself, and while writing *Laurinda*. It is such a potent symbol because when I got my first kilt (\$115 back in 1996!) I felt extremely guilty: neither of my parents had owned any singular item of clothing that cost as much. Also, I watched the way private school kids moved and walked

and behaved in their uniforms, and realised that little six-year-old boys in blazers could not 'play' or 'play fight' without doing at least a hundred bucks damage to their clothes. The blazers were also emblematic of the suits they would wear in the future as men of power.

Another symbol is the sewing machine, because that's Lucy's mother's livelihood, and its hum is their backdrop music. Also, the sewing machine is how uniforms and designer clothes are made, except there is such a chasm between the world of Laurinda and the world of Stanley that the girls at Laurinda would never make this link. They cannot fathom that one of their fellow classmates helps make the designer Coast & Co. clothes they buy in the stores.

Finally, of course, is the gruesome symbol of the tampon. I had to include this as a potent symbol because as much as you try and mould a young Laurindan lady into absolute perfect Grammar-school femininity, there is no difference between her and her bogan Stanley sisters: they all bleed the same. They are all full of the same hormonal surges and violent urges. The difference is that some choose to act these out.

## Question 10.

Much of your description is vivid, engaging and hilarious. How important is humour in a novel of this weight? What role does it play?

**(AP):** Humour was a very important tool in this book, if not the most important, because I wanted *Laurinda* to be a satire first and foremost. So many awful things happen at school that if you are two decades older, you forget. You forget how students can be political animals, and how girls, who from a very young age

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have competition curbed out of them, can be cruel. The use of humour illustrates this cruelty so much better than if I had told another woeful tale about bullying. Humour is also illuminating – when you can laugh at the ugly characters, sometimes you can see them as human, full of foibles and foiled ambitions. You feel a little sorry for them even.

## Question 11.

Racism is still very much present in contemporary Australian society and as young people become less tolerant of racist behaviour, there is now a tendency to label every incident where race is mentioned as an example of racism even when it is not. Some of the examples in the text come from ignorance and a false sense of superiority, but some are examples of racism. Which conversations would you direct students to consider as examples of racial discrimination?

**(AP):** I deliberately made the ‘race’ related aspect of *Laurinda* subtle, because that’s how racism works in real life. You are never quite sure whether something is racist or not, unless it’s in your face. Lucy grows up in Stanley where the local residents at the shopping centre are explicitly racist and hateful. They’re afraid of Asians stealing their jobs and hogging government support.

But at Laurinda, which is meant to be more civilised, the girls have not had much exposure to different cultures, so they treat every brown and yellow person like a fascinating perpetual exchange student. They don’t realise that those kids – Lucy, Harshan, Anton, Linh – are teenagers in exactly the same ways they are. They don’t realise that by reducing a person solely to their culture or race is a form of racism. It’s like

treating a person with disability as if the only riveting thing about them was their blindness or deafness.

## Question 12.

What is the one message or concept you want readers, boys and girls, to think about after they have read your book?

**(AP):** I hate the idea that young adult books must be didactic, and I never set out to write a take home message in *Laurinda*, mainly because I don’t want students just reading this question and writing my answer in their exams! I wanted this to be a book to make students ask questions about character, class and culture, and hopefully reflect on the attainment of equality.

One particular high school I went to was in the working class suburb of Braybrook, and most of the girls there helped at home or worked outside of school. They were also responsible for either looking after sick adults, or at the very least, translating for parents who could not read or write. Many had to fill out their own enrolment and excursion forms. In all senses except legally, they were like adults.

Conversely, I’ve visited countless other girls’ schools where the students are trained to be ‘future leaders’ through debating, public speaking and musical prowess. Yet many of those girls aren’t even allowed to catch a public bus home by themselves. They seem so helpless, which is why I called the trio of mean girls in *Laurinda* ‘The Cabinet’ – a very showy artefact which belies its conservative domesticity. The girls in the Cabinet may rule over their domain, but their domain is a very insular one.

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In *Laurinda*, I wanted to explore how you could have one group of students who were very ‘worldly’ and political in an academic sense but had no clue outside their leafy suburbs, while another class were real-worldly, but had no chance academically.

## 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.

## Teaching notes for *Laurinda*

To download complimentary teaching notes for *Laurinda* and other teaching resources, visit [www.blackincbooks.com/teachers](http://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 cliquy, hierarchical nature of the playground.” – *The Sunday Age*

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