

# Black Inc. Australian Curriculum Questions

**TITLE:** Unpolished Gem

**AUTHOR:** Alice Pung

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**SUBJECT:** English

Suitable for middle and senior secondary

*Australian Curriculum Questions for Unpolished Gem by Alice Pung.*

*Questions by Laura Gordon.*

## Question 1.

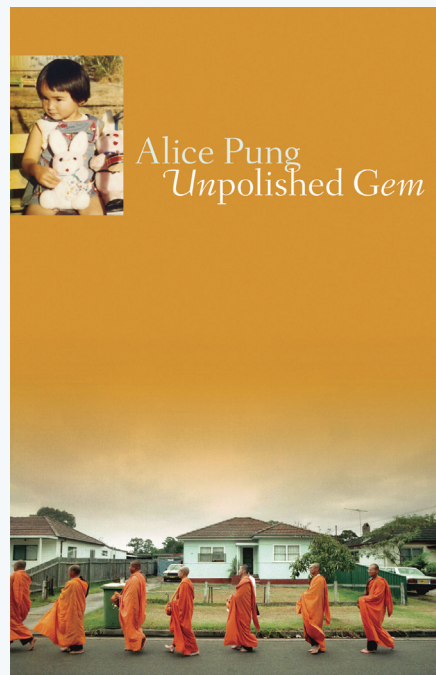
Tell us a little about the experience of writing your first book *Unpolished Gem*? What was the inspiration and what did you find the hardest?

**Alice Pung:** 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.

## Question 2.

You have described this book as being about “yellow people aspiring to be middle class.” Can you tell us a



little more about that?

**(AP):** I grew up in the working class suburb of Braybrook, surrounded by bogans and bogasians, which are bogan-Asians. While our parents worked, we were fed a steady diet of television dreams. I remember watching advertisements for a cruise ship called Fair Star, and realising that my parents never took holidays. They were working to get themselves – and us – out of poverty, towards owning a house and land package in the safer, verdant, far-flung neighbourhoods.

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.

## Question 3.

You have said that “southeast Asian 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.” Given that ‘Alice’ spends most of the time making fun of herself in *Unpolished Gem*, how did the Australian-Asian community respond when the novel first came out in 2006?

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(AP): Many of the older generation – Asian parents – would buy my book for their children because on the blurb it mentions that I am a lawyer. Because many of these parents couldn't read much, if any, English, they thought it was a manual on how to 'make it'!

But then I'd start getting letters from young adults who'd actually read the book and realised that I had a severe nervous breakdown near the end. Suddenly, I had lots of teenage girls, in their middle or later years of high school, writing to me about the pressures of their families. I'd have young men write to me about the pressure of being the oldest son. It was wonderful to know that young adults all over Australia felt like someone had understood them, at least in some small way. These 'quiet Asian high achievers' were stronger than society gave them credit for.

And there was the irony – the migrant parents who hot-housed their kids and wanted them to have every opportunity in life – were the poor folk those very kids wrote to me complaining about. It was such a heartbreaking generational chasm, and I hoped I conveyed it in *Unpolished Gem*.

#### Question 4.

What did you want readers to get out of the book when you first wrote it? Has this changed over the years?

(AP): When the book first came out, I was twenty-five and a pastoral care adviser to many first year university students – beautiful, high achieving young men and women from all over Australia and the world. I understood how you could lose perspective if society deems that you must succeed at all costs. I wanted readers to understand that failure was not such a terrible thing. Not everyone succeeds but everyone will encounter failure at some point in their lives.

Now that I am in my thirties, I have noticed that *Unpolished Gem* is also a book about class as much as it is about culture; and Australians are reluctant to talk about class in a nuanced way. It's always the 'bogans' versus the 'liberal yuppies', with one group being charged with racism more than the other. But having grown up with working class families who sent their kids to school with the kids of refugees, I discovered that you should judge people not on their beliefs, but

on their behaviour.

#### Question 5.

How much do you think social media has changed the teenage experience from what you went through in your teens? What would have been different for you if you were exposed to the Internet in the way today's youth are?

(AP): I don't think I would have become a writer! I would have just whinged on Facebook about being stuck at home looking after babies, and after receiving seventeen 'likes' to my posts, I would have felt comforted. Social media really does connect people, but social isolation drives you to think in longer paragraphs than two sentence Facebook posts, and it also helps you develop introspection: two very important traits for a writer!

#### Question 6.

Can you tell us about your reading influences when you were growing up? What surprises you the most about teenage reading habits today?

(AP): My favorite authors were Sonya Hartnett, John Marsden and Melina Marchetta (still are!) as well as Robert Cormier and Cynthia Voight. These authors were never condescending to their readers. They did not treat 'teenagehood' as a period of life where they, older and wiser, would be able to impart wisdom and perspective. Young adults are deeper than didactic young adult stories give them credit for. They are interested in character and choices, not 'good messages.' By always drilling 'positive messages' into them, we underestimate a young adult's innate capacity to choose good.

That's why young people still love reading dystopias. This is not surprising at all. In a society that pushes success at all costs and views personal happiness as the most important thing, there is no outlet for their ordinary human feelings of frustration or despair. People – young and old – will always be drawn to the stories with depth, which are not necessarily the stories peppered with neat cultural references or topical themes.

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## Question 7.

*Unpolished Gem* shares very candidly your struggle with your mental health during your final year of school. You have worked with many young people over the years, particularly in your current role at The University of Melbourne. What is your perception of the negative influences on young people's mental health? Are we any better at talking about it and dealing with it now?

**(AP):** It depends on many things: how ashamed you feel, your cultural background, your community's perceptions, and even whether your parents even believe in such a thing as an 'anxiety disorder' can make a huge difference to whether you might get better.

Also, some teenagers can be a bit melodramatic and label every temporary sadness 'depression', which does not help those in the throes of real clinical depression. However, perhaps our society is inherently flawed in its perpetuation of 'happiness' as the norm, so that every time a young person feels a feeling that is not joy or contentment, they think there is something wrong with them (or their parents think so). Dissatisfaction, doubt and sadness are normal and lead to growth of character. But real anxiety disorders and depression are not 'ordinary' feelings and they need to be treated.

## Question 8.

You have described the cover of a book as very important as you know how much it can influence a reader. Can you tell us a little about the cover of each of your books, the process of selecting these images and how much input you can have in these choices?

**(AP):** When I saw one of the early proposed covers of *Unpolished Gem* – gloomy background with some morose looking little Asian girl in a dress sitting in a dark room – I was horrified! I'd written this funny book and suddenly to sell it, it would be presented as every other Orientalist trope. My dad took one look and said, "Oh no, look at that poor miserable kid on the cover. People will think your book is about childhood sexual abuse."!

Fortunately, I have excellent publishers who then

designed a few more covers. When we saw the bright orange sunset and the monks walking in front of the commission houses in a suburban Australian street, I knew we had hit gold.

The same designer, Tom Deverell, who did the orange cover of *Unpolished Gem* also designed the great cover for *Growing Up Asian in Australia*. I didn't mind an Asian kid on that, because he's winking and sticking out his tongue, and he is cheekily coloured yellow.

For *Her Father's Daughter*, the cover of the second edition had a photo of my parents standing outside the Midway migrant hostel, holding me as a small baby. I love this cover because it's so personal – you can see how narrowly my parents escaped starvation: their cheeks are hollowed, and yet their eyes are shining with hope.

Finally, for *Laurinda*, my latest book, Peter Long put a picture of a generic private school kilt against a garish yellow background. It was ingenious – a triumph of pop art aesthetics as well as unsettling intrigue: it got readers wondering whether the book was based on their private school!

## Question 9.

When it came to editing the anthology *Growing up Asian in Australia*, what were you most looking forward to?

**(AP):** I was looking forward to reading all the stories from different Asian Australians all over the country – I loved how a rural Asian Australian childhood differed from an inner city one, or how growing up in the 1950s differed from growing up in the 1990s due to the differing social and political climate.

## Question 10.

Do you have a favourite story from the anthology? What is the most moving for you? What is the funniest?

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**(AP):** ALL the stories are my favorites, which is how they made it into the anthology! It was very hard choosing. However, I notice that there are some stories that resonate with students everywhere, regardless of their cultural background: Diana Nguyen's '5 Ways to Disappoint your Vietnamese Mother' really gets teenage girls' sympathies. Benjamin Law's 'Towards Manhood' brings depth to the Asian experience by introducing ideas of masculinity in a hilarious way, and Pauline Nguyen's moving story 'The Courage of Soldiers' is also a favorite among schools for its unflinching portrayal of parental pressure.

One story that I think has been overlooked, but which moved me very much, was Paul Nguyen's story about the death of his father and his own coming out. The other was 'Mia Francis's (pseudonym) adoption of her son Ricky – a woman who was raising an Asian son, but who was not Asian herself.

## Question 11.

In many of your keynote speeches and interviews you have referred to the power of language. In our current society, who are denied access to this power? What effect does it have on their lives and the lives of their children?

**(AP):** 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 dependant on her children and husband, perhaps placing more pressure on them for her overall happiness and to alleviate the loneliness.

As a young person, it was quite a burden for me to be responsible for the happiness of an adult, especially one in the throes of depression. But when my mother went to work as a salesperson, she gradually picked up enough English and had enough social interaction to feel a part of something larger.

## Question 12.

Your use of humour and turn of phrase seems to make good use of the Australian tradition of making fun of oneself. Can you share with us what your favourite Aussie phrase is?

**(AP):** My husband taught me this one: 'Kangaroo loose in the top paddock' to refer to someone who's not quite right in the head. It's kind of affectionate and funny.

## Question 13.

*Unpolished Gem* focuses on the influences of your mother and grandmother on your life. Your more recent book *Her Father's Daughter* takes a different emphasis. Where did the inspiration for this come from? Was it a more difficult book to write?

**(AP):** *Her Father's Daughter* was the most difficult book I have written to date. First, it was about my father, who doesn't appear as a major character in my first book. Secondly, it is about the Cambodian genocide, Thirdly, it is written in third person. Finally, the book is written in alternating chapters, like a conversation between a father and daughter. It took a very long time to work this approach out, but once I got it, the story came – in trickles. This was a ten year work in progress that was eventually finished when I turned 30!

## Question 14.

Stories of the Killing Fields in Cambodia feature in this book. How did you first find out about the truth of this time in history and more importantly, the impact on your family?

**(AP):** Growing up with survivors of genocide, you always hear stories about your parents' experiences. It's as common as hearing stories about Australian-born parents going to see the Beatles or growing up on the farm – part of their young adulthood. My dad just happened to spend his surviving a holocaust, and because he has a sense of humour, he always told us stories in a hilarious, black-comedy light.

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Looking back now, I think this was because he didn't want to traumatize us. But when I began to research our family history and the history of Cambodia, the magnitude of what he had been through hit me. Suddenly, many things about our childhood and my teenage years made sense, like my father's paranoia and anxiety.

## Question 15.

One of the unique experiences of many Asian Australian children and teenagers growing up here seems to be the sacrifice their parents make on their behalf. What lasting impact does this have?

**(AP):** Everlasting guilt even deeper than the reputed Catholic guilt that some kids complain of!

## Question 16.

Is there a secret to telling a good story?

**(AP):** Each writer does this differently. There's no universal secret. But I always start with character, never with a 'message' in mind.

## Question 17.

You have quoted Amy Tan as describing "writing as an act of compassion". How has this influenced your own experience as a writer?

**(AP):** I never have characters that are 100% good or 100% evil – I don't believe in such polarities.

## Question 18.

As well as a writer you are also a lawyer. What have you learnt from each profession?

**(AP):** They are both quite similar when I think about it: lawyers have to tell convincing, persuasive stories. Writers have to make fiction seem like the truth.

## Question 19.

The experience of being a woman in Australia in 2014 is very different for first generation migrants like yourself. What lessons do the women of your mother's generation have to teach not only Asian Australian women, but all women living in Australia at the moment?

**(AP):** My mother – like many migrant women who came from Asia, or Italy, or Greece or Malta, who escaped war – also escaped the plight of vanity. These

were real tough, working class women who had no time to do their hair or nails but just worked day in and out. My mum was never affected by body image advertising, so never passed that onto me. Because they had starved, they also drilled it into us that we were never ever to do so, so it is true that kids from those cultures tend to, on a whole, be less affected by eating disorders like anorexia. Finally, they are astute judges of character. Having been silent for so long, they have learned to read people's faces and body language very carefully. They probably have the highest emotional intelligence quotients of anyone in Australia!

## 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*.  
[www.alicepung.com](http://www.alicepung.com)

## 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 *Unpolished Gem*

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