

“Alice Pung is a gem. Her voice is the real thing.” —AMY TAN



Alice Pung *Unpolished Gem*



TEACHING NOTES BY LAURA GORDON

‘Alice Pung is a gem. Her voice is the real thing.’
—Amy Tan

‘There’s something striking on every page of *Unpolished Gem*.’ —Helen Garner

‘*Unpolished Gem* is virtuoso storytelling.’ —*The Australian*

‘A memoir so vivid that images from it linger behind your eyelids.’ —*The Age*

‘*Unpolished Gem* ... offer(s) a rare bicultural vantage point on Australian multiculturalism’ —*The Sydney Morning Herald*

‘... intelligent and touching’ —*The Herald Sun*

‘*Unpolished Gem* is a delightful read – a funny, touching debut from a writer we’re sure to hear more from.’ —*The Courier Mail*

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

Unpolished Gem

By Alice Pung

“Young girls – particularly Southeast Asian girls – are socialised not to vocalise any form of anger or annoyance. And 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 ... So I was tired of reading 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 going to write a book about yellow people aspiring to become white middle class!” – Alice Pung, www.alicepung.com

Summary

Alice Pung’s autobiographical account is set in suburban Melbourne and reveals the struggle, isolation, torment and joy of being a first generation Cambodian-Chinese girl growing up between two cultures. The story straddles life before she was born, life as a child, a teenager and a university student. She cleverly relates the stories that her family recalls to maintain their sense of culture, and also their day-to-day tales of them trying to develop a sense of identity in the Promised Land. Some find it much easier than others to belong to this new country, “where no one walks like they have to hide” (p9). Pung is able to capture the wonder and awe of her parents and grandparents as they first arrive in a land where a little Green man tells the cars to stop for them. This is starkly contrasted with Alice’s own struggle between the white Australian culture she is living in and the Asian traditions and expectations that dictate every minute of her life. Even the darkest moments are punctuated with her clever turn of phrase and sharp wit; inherited from her mother and enhanced with the Australian sense of ‘taking the mickey’ she has witnessed her whole life.

“This story does not begin on a boat. We begin our story in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, in a market swarming with fat pigs and thin people.” (p1)

The suburb is Footscray, “where words like *and*, *at* and *of* are redundant, where full sentences are not necessary.” Alice describes a filthy market filled with brown faces and her father wandering around trying to purchase the pig blood jelly that her mother would normally haggle for. But her mother is in the hospital giving birth to her first child, Alice, or Agheare, as her family knows her. The warm description of her father is one of the few detailed passages she shares of him as so much of her writing is filled with the influences of her mother and paternal Grandmother. This is the prologue and like so much of Pung’s writing it is rich with description, sharp with humour and warmly self-effacing. Pung’s story isn’t one of a new arrival, filled with gratitude, or fear, but it is someone who experiences the delight and terror of being fiercely loved by both her mother, and her paternal grandmother in a country foreign to both of them.

The memoir is not told chronologically, instead it moves back and forwards through time, to a desperate time when her grandparents fled Pol Pot and his regime, to when her parents “were married in the bustling tedium of an ordinary day in Vietnam” (p119). The stories of her grandmother fill in much of the history of this family that Alice would not have witnessed herself. The romantic tale of how her mother and father were reunited after many years after her “mother and her family escaped to Vietnam, while (her) father and his family were sent to the Killing Fields” (p111) is recounted as Auntie

Ah BuKien visits Alice, sizing her up as a future daughter-in-law. While arranged marriages are something her father deems as part of the old country, there is no guarantee that this means Alice will ever choose her own husband. Certainly not while her mother has any say in it.

The narrative reveals a little girl too scared to ask her teacher to go to the toilet that keeps “pissing herself”, a deep profound love for her grandmother and an overwhelming insecurity that sends her spiraling into depression. The responsibility of caring for her siblings, fulfilling the role of the good Asian daughter and supporting her demanding and unstable mother all take their toll on Alice and see her withdraw even further into a lonely existence. The parallel between Alice’s mother struggling to fit in to this new society without the language or the skills required, with Alice’s own struggle to fit into the society she has been born into, both have harrowing consequences. But the recovery of each woman through their own tenacity is testament to the strength of character of both mother and daughter. Alice finally gets to experience a love story of her own, with a “white ghost” her mother does not approve of. It is Alice’s own expectations of herself and her future that end it. It is a decision that is imbued with a profound respect for her family and her culture.

Introductory activities

- Before reading the text, invite predictions on what this book may be about simply by looking at the cover. Invite students to consider all the clues we are given about time, place and themes. After they have read the book, ask them to create an alternative cover.
- Make a Venn diagram of all of the similarities between Alice the teenager and themselves. Consider family, responsibilities, relationships, culture, traditions, goals and ambitions, mental health, hobbies.
- This novel is set before technology had a significant role in the lives of teenagers as it does it today. Invite students to debate by ‘standing on the line’ whether Alice would be allowed to have a mobile phone, Facebook account, and computer in her room with Internet access.
- Create a class blog. Set weekly tasks that follow on from class activities that students can respond to. They may include short creative writing tasks, finding relevant quotes from the text, visiting Alice Pung’s website, responding to an issue raised in the text or sharing an opinion about the actions of a character. Some of these activities feature in these notes.
- To establish a sound understanding of the plot, divide the class into 6 groups. As students arrive to class, give each one a Skittle or M&M. (You need to have selected enough of each colour to divide the class into 6 groups.) The colour determines the group they are in. Assign each group one part of the novel and group 6 will work on the Prologue and the Epilogue. Each group re-reads their section and then prepares the following to share with the class; brief plot summary in dot points, ten key quotes, a short passage to read aloud and three ‘fat questions’. (These questions should begin with why, how, justify, explain, what if, who and lead to wide answers rather than narrow, or skinny answers.) Set the section for reading homework the night before each group will present to familiarize themselves with that Part. The group responsible for each section leads the class through the review of each section.

Characters

Alice / Agheare

This first-person narrative begins before Alice was born, not long after her family had settled in Australia. Through the keen observation, vivid imagery and sharp wit of Alice, we follow her from a baby with a “clump of black hair plastered to her head like a Beatle circa the early 60’s”. She is given the Chinese name ‘Good News’ and a sensible English name unlike some of her Chinese-Australian counterparts who have names like Mercedes, Visa or Freedom. Alice takes us through her childhood and shares with us the love she has for her Grandmother and Mother, but also the manipulation she experiences from each. She discovers early on that her “grandmother and mother do not get on” and at the age of four she becomes an informer, “moving from one camp to the other, depending on which side offers the best bribes”. Both of these women manipulate her, but it is the demands of her mother to care for her siblings as she gets older to allow her mother to work, or sleep as she has been working all night, that eventually have a devastating effect on Alice’s mental health. The constant derision from her mother that she is not helpful enough or a dutiful enough daughter, coupled with the constant threats and manipulation are shocking to the reader. Alice recounts a time when her mother threatens to take her brother and kill herself to punish Alice. She is blamed for her baby sister rolling off the bed when at the age of 9 her younger siblings are her sole responsibility.

We learn of Alice’s family moving into their beautiful new house where “there were no more paper-chains from the Target advertisements strung up from the stipple-dot plaster ceiling.” Alice tells readers how her mother packed away their new arrival clothes “to be shipped off to those Fresh-Off-the-Boats-and-Planes who would, we hoped, marvel over them the same awe and seemingly everlasting gratitude that we once had”. There has been a shift, but not completely. They are no longer the new arrivals, but they are not part of this society yet either. This is indicative of the torment she experiences throughout the novel. She is acutely aware of the expectations her family have of her as the good Asian daughter, and also how these expose and exclude her from those she associates with.

Eventually, this level of expectation both academically and domestically results in Alice’s world crumbling down around her. She descends into depression. Alice describes waking “one morning with a false skin on (her) face”. As she describes how her life might seem perfect from the outside, it was “the false, unsettling undertones” that were drawing her life from her. It is only the exceptional result she gets for her VCE that allows her to be accepted into the law degree her parents had always hoped for that brings her out of her “nervous breakdown”. Once at University she meets a “white ghost boy” that she almost falls in love with. This relationship is also tormented by her self-doubt as she wonders why he could possibly have chosen her over everyone else. She respects and understands the cultural expectations that as a girl she is “like cotton wool, once dirtied, it can never be cleaned.” She resists losing her virginity to him for fear of becoming “faulty goods” and as he finally leaves for Perth, it is Alice who takes control and ends the relationship. She is far more self-assured, determined and appealing than she gives herself credit for.

- We know that Alice Pung wrote journals in real life. Write one entry of a really difficult experience she faced at school that she does not share with us during the novel.
- “So I began a *Guinness Book of Records* in at thirteen, where I made myself the world record holder in all the categories: ‘Record for the person who has pilfered every single hairstyle Ronald MacDonald has had for the past ten years’ (mum made me get a perm to burn off all the head-lice eggs), ‘Record for the best Ironing-Board impersonation’ (I was flat-chested), and ‘Record for the Worst Face in the history of the Universe’ (self explanatory).” (alicepung.com)

Add 5 more of these to her list and share them with your classmates on the blog. Try and mimic the way Alice makes fun of herself.

- Beginning on page 177 is the description of Alice’s mental health deteriorating. Read this chapter. What are the really powerful images she uses to describe her withdrawal from those around her? If she was able to articulate how she was feeling to her school counselor what would she say? Write this conversation.
- Create a Mind map of Alice. Divide it in half with one side representing her Chinese-Cambodian heritage and the other the Australian influence. Choose a key symbol for each part of Alice and include the people, the popular culture and the stories that influence her from each side.
- It could be argued that Alice loved her Grandmother more than she loved her mother. Discuss with evidence whether this is the case.
- Consider the title. How does this reflect Alice’s character?

Mother

Alice’s mother, Kien, is a source of much torment for Alice. Even as a baby, the care of Alice is shared with her mother-in-law who lives with them from their first arrival in Australia. And this makes her equally jealous and distant toward her daughter. She manipulates Alice from a very young age to reveal what her grandmother says about her. The game is played both ways. For most of the text we only know of her mother through the relationship they share. The threats to kill herself, her depression, her finger-numbing work making gold jewelry and her refusal to learn English are recounted without malice, but as a way of making sense of the tough love she feels from her mother. Alice doesn’t show a lot of sympathy for her mother, but there is admiration in her diligence, her refusal to give up, her strategies to get clients to pay up and eventually her ability to sell white goods better than anyone else.

Alice’s mother’s past is revealed through the stories of her life in Cambodia. Stories that Alice wasn’t part of, but as all children do with their parents, learn through the retelling over many years. We learn of her parents’ romance and their wedding that occurred “in the bustling tedium of an ordinary day in Vietnam, wearing the best clothes they could find, which were no more than ordinary.” (P119) She had met Alice’s father many years before and they were reunited after he had spent many years trapped in Cambodia. With nine years difference in age and a form to get her out of Vietnam, she agreed to marry him.

This is a woman who has endured “one hot, sleepy year in (a) refugee camp”, who is the mother to four children, has lived most of her married life with her mother-in-law that she despises and taught herself to use the goldsmithing tools of her husband to forge an occupation for herself. Her refusal to learn English is indicative of her stubbornness, but also contributes to her withdrawal from society. She longs to “be able to enter the world of her children’s minds.” (P143) Her attempts at learning English are short lived and as her health deteriorates and her work becomes more difficult, depression takes hold. She seeks help and eventually recovers. Her future attempts at working in the family electrical store have varied success until finally it is through being herself, a persistent haggler and straight talker that she is able to “become one of the top salespeople in Springvale, and there was nothing she could not sell.” (P205)

It is with tenderness that Alice imagines her mother “at the same age, riding on the back of (her) father’s bicycle in Vietnam, her hands around his waist, the excitement and fission of trying to evade the bicycle behind her.” (P272) This is a woman who is a “shouter not a talker”, has a “list of objections to potential husbands” and who refused to learn as she had no one to speak it to. She hurts Alice beyond imagining, but also loves her fiercely and always has her future in mind. She has the same expectations of the sons of her friends as she does of her daughter, and will accept nothing less than excellent. In many ways she is the best role model Alice has for what it means to be a woman.

- Is Alice’s mother a feminist? What would she say to such a claim?
- Write the letter her mother sends to her family early in the novel, that she knows her mother-in-law cannot read. Include a description of the place she lives, the food, not knowing the language, the behavior of her neighbours or other people she meets.
- ‘Alice’s mother is the most heroic in the novel’. Find ten quotes that support this. Write an argument that would refute this.
- Make a list of all of the difficulties her mother faces. Write down the solution she has for each one.
- We witness one of the conversations she has with her dear friend about how her children treat her poorly. Use this to write another conversation she has with her sister about how she sees Alice before she has her ‘nervous breakdown’.

Grandmother

Alice’s Grandmother is a gregarious, passionate and loving maternal figure to the apple of her eye, Alice. She is a storyteller of a past life filled with such sorrow and torment, but always told with such splendor that a young Alice would plead for more.

“And there would be stories such as I had never known, could never tell, and will never know again because my grandmother was possessed of a form of magic, the magic of words that became movies in the mind.” (P48)

Many of the stories of the past are told with Alice’s voice, but it is with beauty and suspense of her grandmothers telling that have enabled these to be passed on. There are stories of such sadness, of babies being stolen and never returned, of toddlers being crushed under shelves, of a husband being murdered by the regime of Pol Pot. These are interwoven into the narrative, and little by little, the tenacity of this woman is revealed.

There is no wonder there was such angst between these two women, Alice's mother and grandmother. Perhaps the relative silence of her father is testament to the size of these women's characters.

Ma, as she is affectionately called, cares for Alice for many years as her mother labours away at her trade. She is the one who ties red ribbons in her hair, boils her an egg in the morning, tells her stories at night and knows of her pants-wetting problem. The timing of Alice's breakdown is not surprising given it is so close to when her beloved grandmother has a stroke. She has offered Alice so much support and advice over the years and it is almost as if her legs have been taken out from under her as her grandmother's health deteriorates. There is no denying she is also manipulative and that she creates much of the tension in the relationship between Alice and her mother, but for Alice she has always been a shining light.

- The Immigration Museum in Melbourne has invited Alice's grandmother to be the source of inspiration for a new exhibition. Source images, or draw, or describe five photos that would be included in this collection. Give a short story explaining the significance of each photo.
- Write the Eulogy her father would give at her funeral. This may not be the case for her Buddhist service, so imagine this could have happened.
- Write the final letter Alice would have loved to give her Grandmother before she passed away.
- Alice has been invited to contribute to an anthology titled 'Lessons from my Grandmother'. Write the piece she sends the editor.

Father

Alice's father receives less attention than the maternal figures in her life. He is hard working, supportive, versatile and has become successful in this country that he chose because "it doesn't snow there". It was his choice and his doing to finally leave the country that had been his refuge after finally escaping the horror of life in Cambodia during Pol Pot's reign. After four years "he emerged looking like a brown skeleton". But he takes his mother and younger sister to the Promised Land, where "the little Green Man was an eternal symbol of government existing to serve and protect." A land so different from where he had come. He studies at night, works during the day and eventually owns two electrical store franchises. He becomes a successful small business owner who can send his eldest daughter to school, and then a better school and finally to a school where the wealthiest in the area go. Alice respects and loves her father and while he supports the rules that her mother puts in place for the children, he doesn't manipulate Alice the way her mother does. In many ways he is less of an influence on Alice, even though they work together, share the language and an understanding of this society in a way her mother never could. Perhaps his gentler presence does not demand her immediate attention, but it is clear from her behavior with Michael that she most certainly respects his wishes and adheres to them.

- Read the Prologue. What picture is presented of her father? Does this change throughout the novel.
- While their marriage has lasted through many difficulties, they are still together and very much in love. Eating the mango on p274 shows just how connected they remain. What do you think he would say he loves about his wife and his daughter?

Michael

Michael is Alice's first serious boyfriend. Much to the horror of her mother, he is a "white ghost" and therefore is not serious marriage material. He is gentle, educated, funny and articulate, and he is genuinely interested in Alice. He copes with her self-doubt and overbearing parents without any drama. He endeavours to always have her on time, whether this is just pure fear of how her parents will react, or he genuinely respects their decision is unclear, but it enables the two teenagers to continue seeing each other. It is Alice's respect for her own cultural expectations, that surprises even herself, that she ends things between them. He is returning to Perth and she is too frightened she will "doom" herself if they stay together any longer anyway. So they break up. She is devastated, but satisfied that she has done the real thing. We are only left to imagine how Michael reacts once he does get home and unpacks his things to find all of her notes and messages there.

- Read the family dinner passage again. Consider how Michael would recall this even to his own family. What would he note was similar or different to his own family and what would his perception be of Alice's mother and father?

Language and humour

Imagery

Pung makes excellent use of her skill with language to create vivid imagery. Consider each of the various quotes offered and respond to the impact they intend to have on the reader at that moment. Add to this list with five more examples of the imagery she uses. This could be included in the class blog.

- Cotton wool and the polished gem - "A girl is like cotton wool—once she's dirtied, she can never be clean again. A boy is like a gem—the more you polish it, the brighter it shines." (P 216)
- The market - The prologue
- New arrivals sheer delight - "It is early morning and their grins are so wide that it seems they all went to bed with clothe-hangers shoved in their mouths." (P7)
- The rubber mask - "I could not prise off this rubber death-mask." (P177)
- Description of others - "a lot of them look as if they have sucked on seven lemons and forgotten to spit out the pips". (P28)
- Snake analogy for family - p92

Humour

Can you find the following humorous passages in the text?

- The cultural misunderstandings - eating dog food and sleeping on top of the sheets
- Making fun of herself
- Lighthearted reference to the horror her family experienced

Try and find two others to test your classmates on.

Themes

The Asian-Australian Migrant Experience

Alice Pung has spoken in detail about wanting to write a novel that is about migrants coming to Australia and trying to assimilate to the middle class culture that is present. She was sick of reading stories of the hardships and overcoming some evil existence to survive and live a successful life. So this novel is about the struggles of many families who come here to make a new life for themselves. It explores the pressure of “the expected Asian high achiever score” at the end of high school and of the gender roles that are automatically impressed on children in these families. It doesn’t dwell on the horror and cruelty of life in the countries they have fled, instead it jokes about how “most people here have not even heard about Brother Number One in Socialist Cambodia, and to uninitiated ears his name sounds like an Eastern European Stew”. The opening chapters tell of the awe and admiration of this country where “new sugar packets appear on the table the next day”. The yellow pole with the rubber button astounds Alice’s father and grandmother as “back where (her) father came from, cars did not give way to people, people gave way to cars. To have a car in Cambodia you had to be rich” (p8).

As Alice moves up through the levels of education, each one exposing her to a higher class that she can compete academically with, but never belong to. The Valedictory Dinner her family attends is testament to this as she sits on “the only ‘ethnically-enhanced table’”. It reveals the struggle her Asian-Australian family share with so many others; that while their parents are “working their backs off to send their children to the grammar school” they are certainly creating the high-achievers they desire, but socially they are still not accepted with the elite of society they are being educated with. Here these families have achieved the wealth they could have only dreamed in the countries they were born in. And yet, this comfortable life where their children are safe and well educated, where even the dogs are well fed, there is still much unhappiness.

“Inside these double-story brick-veneer houses, countless silent women were sitting at their dining tables. They were living the dream lives of the rich and idle in Phnom Penh, and yet their imposed idleness make them inarticulate and loud” (p147).

In fact these are women who spend their spare time comparing their “litany of lamentations about who had the worse state of affairs, culminating in the topic of Disappointing Children”, of whom Alice featured highly. The son who didn’t make it into medicine and whose mother was “incensed that she couldn’t pay his way into the course” described him as a “retard” for only achieving a score of 92.4. These are parents with very high expectations for their children for all of the sacrifices they have made. It is their children who can drag them into the next class of society, they are their chance of progression. After all, while the language and food of their countries of origin are being forgotten, one tradition that remains steadfast is the treatment of the elderly. Asian children are expected to care for, support and live with their parents. It is something that is markedly different for the “white ghosts” they are assimilating with.

Family

*“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.” – Alice Pung (alicepung.com)*

The Pung family is anything but ‘the joyless Asian’. They are funny, warm and witty and largely self-effacing. And often without intention, Alice’s storytelling makes readers laugh at experiences that might otherwise be considered harrowing. The women in this family are in control, they are the ones who care for the children, run the household, remember the language, insist on disciplined study routines and high standards. They cook, talk, teach and learn and if they do work, it is often for little money and even less satisfaction. They are fierce about their reputation, especially among the gossiping women over whose daughters were seen with which boys. And they look after their own. Alice’s grandmother is integral to her identity and her upbringing. It is expected that all children will care for their parents. Alice’s father is still the main breadwinner and he is her main support during her nervous breakdown. Eventually Alice comes to accept herself and the culture she is inherently proud of.

Love and Marriage

This is a novel with powerful love stories. It is no wonder that Alice is overwhelmed by her ‘Babysitter’s Club’ romances, as the ones in her family are even more unbelievable than the novels she devours. Her grandmother fell for an older married man and became his second wife. While her mother and father were only reunited after he suffered under the regime of Pol Pot. Both women choose their own husbands, despite each being betrothed to other women. They marry for love and then they love fiercely. Her grandfather was killed as a young man and her love transfers to her children, and then to her grandchildren. Alice imagines her mother as a young woman “trying as hard as (she) did, to get some time alone with the man she loved.” She pictures them riding along carefree on the back of his bike filled with joy and love. Knowing they chose each other, despite him being her former boss, and they had watched their lives “multiply into four new ones” instills in Alice the sanctity of marriage. Her behavior reflects the values of her parents and grandparents.

Gender Roles

“A girl is like cotton wool—once she’s dirtied, she can never be clean again. A boy is like a gem—the more you polish it, the brighter it shines.”

This is the quote that perhaps sums up the difference in the expectations of Asian boys and girls, whether they are growing up in parts of South-east Asia, or in parts of Melbourne. In many respects it is the women we see who maintain control of the family, the finances, who instill the discipline in the children, who teach and care and influence. And as for Alice, like many others, the intentions her parents have for her are no different to the intention other Asian parents have for their sons. For them gender is not an issue, but culture is.

This is a novel where the women feel the misery of being isolated by language and tormented by physical limitations. The men seem to find a place, through their occupation, their study and often their access to the society they try and belong to. Alice feels the enormous weight of expectation, as a daughter, as the eldest child and as the best English speaker in her household. She must fulfill duties that very few teenagers her age would consider. She cares for very young siblings, looks after the entire family

when her mother tries working in the family store and still achieves flawless academic results. Her life is definitely more challenging being a female, but then the role models she has in her life are so capable, and so demanding, that she has little choice.

❖ **Quote Scramble**

In small groups, students are given 20 quotes on strips of paper. They have five envelopes each with a theme written on the front of it. They need to organize the themes into the appropriate envelope as fast as they can. Then use the contents of the envelope to create a poster with a summary of the theme in the middle of the page, a symbol to represent it and all the quotes stuck around the outside.

❖ **9 Card Sentences**

This is intended to have the students make links between the characters, themes, symbols and key ideas of the text by writing a series of sentences. They are each given 9 cards which have a combination of characters, themes and symbols on them. Students arrange them in any order of 3 rows of 3. They need to write eight sentences in total. One sentence for each of the three vertical columns (3), one for each of the horizontal rows (3) and two for the diagonal lines (2). See below for an example.

ALICE	THE ROLE OF WOMEN	GRANDMOTHER
GOLD	MOTHER	ENGLISH LANGUAGE
LOVE AND MARRIAGE	CULTURE	COTTON WOOL

- ❖ Fitting with the time this novel is set, have students create a collage, physically or digitally, including as many of the cultural references that are included in the novel. Students need to distinguish between the Australian cultural references and the Asian references. Some of the older ones may need explaining e.g. Walkman.

Assessment

1. The author Alice Pung has been asked to speak to many school students over the years. Write The Guide to Surviving the VCE according to Alice Pung.
2. Using the snapshot approach, write a piece of writing titled 'The Great Australian Dream'. Include at least four differing perspectives, at least two of these need to be characters from the novel. The snapshot can be of the same event from four different characters e.g. offering a different perspective of the same moment. Or each snapshot can pick up where the last one finishes and take the narrative in a slightly different direction. Or it can be a range of responses to that title.
3. Essay Questions
 - 'Alice's Grandmother is the most significant influence in her life'. Do you agree?
 - "My mother decided that if she knew the English, all her problems would be solved, she would be able to do anything in this new country". Explain how language can divide and empower Alice's family.
 - "My mother puts her hand on her sticking out stomach and smiles. Good-oh, she thinks. Her baby is going to be born with lots of Good-O in her." How does Alice Pung use humour in *Unpolished Gem*?
 - In what ways is *Unpolished Gem* a typical coming-of-age story?

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.



ALICE PUNG is the author of *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*. Alice's novel, *Laurinda*, will be published in November 2014. www.alicepung.com

This story does not begin on a boat. Nor does it contain any wild swans or falling leaves.

In a wonderland called Footscray, a girl named Alice and her Chinese-Cambodian family pursue the Australian Dream – Asian style. Armed with an ocker accent, Alice dives head-first into schooling, romance and the getting of wisdom. Her mother becomes an Aussie battler – an outworker, that is. Her father embraces the miracle of franchising and opens an electrical-appliance store. And every day her grandmother blesses Father Government for giving old people money.

Unpolished Gem is a book rich in comedy, a loving and irreverent portrait of a family, its everyday struggles and bittersweet triumphs. With it, Australian writing gains an unforgettable new voice.

Recommended for middle and upper secondary

Subjects: Non-Fiction/Memoir

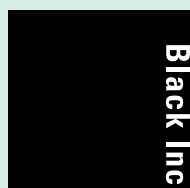
ISBN: 9781863951586

RRP: \$26.95

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