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Book Reviews: Unpolished Gem by Alice Pung

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Unpolished Gem (Alice Pung, Black Inc., \$24.95 pb, ISBN 186395158X, September)

The setting of Unpolished Gem will be at once familiar and completely foreign to many readers. Those familiar with Melbourne will know the suburb of Footscray in which Pung grew up, but most would consider themselves outsiders to the Chinese Cambodian refugee community she presents here. Unpolished Gem is a playfully written and welcoming gateway into the lives of one family for whom the suburb is at first a 'wonderland' and eventually a delicately intertwined community. It begins with the arrival of Alice's parents in Australia, followed closely by the arrival of Alice herself, born a month later. Alice's journey through school and university is sketched in, but her family relations are the constant foreground—the strained interactions between in-laws, the at times conflicting demands of two cultures and the struggles of Alice's mother, locked out of so much by her lack of English, and of Alice herself, whose suffers a breakdown. The energy and affection with which Pung describes this journey make this something akin to hearing the anecdotes of a new friend for the first time. With first love, intergenerational conflicts and issues of identity this would be an appealing read for teens, but its accessible narrative will find it an audience with anyone looking for fresh Australian writing or simply the chance to see a familiar country through someone else's eyes.

Matthia Dempsey is deputy editor of Bookseller+Publisher

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Interview with the Author

Alice Pung's debut is a personal tale of growing up in Melbourne's western suburbs as the daughter of refugees who 'speaks Chinese with a heavy ocker Aussie accent'. She tells **Mathia Dempsey** how she came to write *Polished Gem* (Black Inc.).

How did you first start writing *Unpolished Gem* and was it with publication in mind?

Unpolished Gem began as a tale for a creative writing tutorial at university, and later a short story in *Meanjin*, which my editor nominated for a Premier's Literary Award. Other people in my creative writing class had travelled the world or done incredibly interesting things, and all I had to work with were my diaries. One night, sitting on the floor of my room, I turned the page of my journal and found an entry about a certain family friend who was trying to set me up to become her future daughter-in-law. What I had to say about this was probably inconsequential to her in the bartering process, so I decided to write about it. The title of my book derives from an old Cambodian saying: 'A girl is like cotton wool. Once dirtied, it can never be clean again. A boy is like a gem, the more you polish it, the brighter it shines.'

How did you get the book published and what was your experience of the writing process?

Chris Feik, the senior editor of Black Inc., called me out of the blue one afternoon when I was stacking books at the library, and left a message on my phone. He asked whether my story 'Unpolished Gem' was part of a book. I returned his call and told him yes, and that I would have the first four chapters to him soon. So I spent my summer break writing them. The evening before I visited Chris' office, I had watched the movie *Frida*, and there was a scene where the artist Frida Kahlo resolutely limps with her paintings under one arm to the studio of the eminent artist Diego Riviera. So I woke up that morning and thought, 'why not?' (although I didn't attempt the limping part). Chris was very welcoming, and he expressed great interest in my writing. And three years later, I have a book.

I could not have written this novel as a full-time writer because the stories are quite personal and I would have been spending too much time thinking about myself. So I finished writing this book while working in a law firm, teaching part-time in politics and creative writing, and being a residential college counsellor. During that time I also got myself admitted to legal practice, which was a very happy day for my family and I.

It's a very personal portrait of your family and at times quite a critical one—particularly of your mother and grandmother. Did you have concerns about publishing it?

I wrote about my grandmother and mother because they are two very extraordinary people in my life who weren't ever going to have a public voice—my grandmother because she has passed away, and my mother because she is locked out of my Australian life by her lack of English words.

I wanted to tell their stories in an honest way because they taught me important lessons, such as overcoming one's physical and mental limitations. My parents are very proud of me, particularly now they know that with my legal job, I probably can't regress too much into a lazy literary bohemian lifestyle, drinking café lattes and defaming the general honour of Chinese Cambodians! I think the brunt of most of my jokes in my book is myself, actually.

In *Unpolished Gem*, 'Alice' comes across as her own person

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rather than a general representative character. Did you feel any pressure to be speaking for the Australian Chinese Cambodian community you grew up in, or are you content just to have written your own personal experience of it?

My story is just that: a very personal story from the perspective of 'Alice' (who speaks Chinese with a heavy ocker Aussie accent)—a girl who can write literature essays about Shakespeare but can't even explain to her mother what 'Woolworths' means in Chinese. So if that is any indication of my skills, I'm not sure that the Sino-Australian-Cambodian community would want such a poor general representative character!

Do you think there's another novel in you, and what might it be about?

When I wrote *Unpolished Gem*, it was almost twice the size it is now, but we edited it to a nice novel size. So I still have quite a few stories that I think might be the start of another book. I would like to write about being an outsider—of what it would be like for someone like myself, raised in Australia but with an indelible Asian face to be in Asia, surrounded by Asian faces and locked out of the native language. As I have spent most of my life in the western suburbs, this will give me an opportunity to travel, and I expect that I will experience some of the 'fish out of water' experiences my parents felt when they first came to Australia.

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