

Unpolished Gem

Patrick Allington | September 09, 2006

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By Alice Pung

Black Inc, 282pp, \$24.95

ALICE Pung's *Unpolished Gem* is the story of a family rebuilding their lives after Cambodia's appalling Pol Pot years. Pung was conceived in a Thai refugee camp and born after her Chinese-Cambodian parents, her paternal grandmother and an aunt arrived in Melbourne.

In naming Alice, her father invoked a Western story about a girl: "This new daughter of his will grow up in this Wonder Land and take for granted things like security, abundance, democracy and the little green man on the traffic lights."

"This story does not begin on a boat," Pung writes, partly to dash stereotypes, but partly because she is partial to a terrific sentence. She goes on to enliven, complicate, contradict and sometimes even confirm wider community perceptions of Indochinese Australians.

Somehow Pung achieves a tone both lush and raw. For a book so preoccupied with fraught emotions -- both exposed and hidden, and including Pung's own crises -- *Unpolished Gem* possesses the steadiest of heartbeats.

Her descriptions of Melbourne life, of her mother the outworking jewellery-maker, her father the *Retravis* franchisee, the birth of her three siblings, the death of her beloved grandmother, her double life of home and school, are interspersed with tales, brief but not perfunctory, of her elders' pre-Australian lives.

"We are trying to assimilate, to not stand out from the neighbours, to not bring shame to our whole race by carrying over certain habits from the old country, such as growing chickens in the backyard or keeping goats as pets."

In the portrait of her mother, Pung reveals the complexity of assimilation (and the term's revelatory inadequacies). Although strong-willed, opinionated, intelligent and astonishingly hardworking, "She was loud because she could not read or speak the secret talk we knew.

"She could not read because she had been housebound for two decades. And now, over the dinner table, she would watch as my father and his children littered their language with English terms, until every second word was in a foreign tongue". Her emergence from depression and isolation as a salesperson at *Retravis* is a triumph of persistence and courage. The whole episode is recounted by Pung with an assured mix of bluntness, sensitivity and humour.

Storytelling is at the heart of *Unpolished Gem* but this, too, exposes tensions. Pung's grandmother and mother frequently clashed. Both employed four-year-old Alice as ally and spy, leading her to "discover that being good means just being good to the person who is telling you to be good". Her account of this childhood predicament is unsettling, especially when her mother angrily questions her loyalties. But her conclusion is compelling:

I was doomed, early on, to be a word-spreader. To tell these stories that the women of my family made me promise never to tell a soul. Perhaps they told me because they really did want the other camp to hear. Or perhaps my word-spreading is also the only way to see that there was once flesh attached to these bones, that there was once something living and breathing, something that inhaled and exhaled; something that slept and woke up every morning with the past effaced, if only for a moment. That was a good beginning, and in this good beginning the stories would come like slow trickles of truth, like blood coursing through the veins.

Pung's portrait of her grandmother, herself a "magical" storyteller, reveals only snippets of an extraordinary life: a committed communist, she left China for Cambodia under a political cloud; she once tried to swap her baby son for a girl; her first two daughters died in Phnom Penh, from illness and accident; she was the second wife of a man who stole their fifth son for his first wife; she had healing powers; she survived the Pol Pot years. While Pung weaves these stories seamlessly into her narrative I wanted more -- a whole other book -- about her grandmother.

Cambodia remains distant in Pung's narrative: for her it is a foreign country. Pol Pot, too, hovers like a shadow. Pung's focus is elsewhere, and the story would be burdened by descriptions of killing fields and refugee camps.

And there are many ways to write about the consequences of war and crimes against humanity. Still, one time, at a family gathering at a restaurant, Alice's father said:

This fish reminds me of the Pol Pot years when the starved, dead bodies floated up the river during the flood. I got the job of dragging them to higher, dryer land. We wrapped them up in a dry blanket and me and my mate grabbed on to each

end. Every time we tripped, the blanket would get water-soaked and even heavier. Hah hah, so funny! And listen to this - my mate turns to me and says, "Hope you're not going to be this heavy when it's time for me to drag you", and I say to him, "What do you mean when you drag me? I'm going to be the poor soul who will be dragging you!"

He finished by exhorting his guests to eat more fish. Pung says he "did not believe in mental images leaving a bitter aftertaste" but it is one time where she might have added more.

Luong Ung's recent book *Lucky Child* also details the formative years of a Chinese-Cambodian girl. Ung, who survived the Pol Pot years as a child, contrasts her upbringing in the US, raised by her brother and his wife, with the tough and dangerous life endured by her sister in Cambodia. Ung's book brings war-ravaged Cambodia into sharp relief through the story of a family's dispersal, death, survival and rehabilitation. And it bluntly contrasts everyday life in the developed and developing worlds. Despite its strengths, Ung tends to undermine her narrative by forcing allegory upon too many scenarios.

In contrast, *Unpolished Gem* is high-class writing. Pung's narrative is almost stereotypically Australian. She reveals a depth of observation that is intricate yet accessible, unyielding yet generous. She unleashes sardonic humour that avoids condescension. Most of all, recalling Geoffrey Blainey, she encapsulates and energises whole scenes with a single sentence. As with Blainey, the quality of Pung's prose can sometimes mask the fact that there are other interpretations available. Ultimately, Pung is not trying to prove anything. *Unpolished Gem* is virtuoso storytelling not least because the telling is itself a part of the story.

Alice Pung will be a guest at the Brisbane Writers Festival which starts on Wednesday (11).

Patrick Allington is fiction editor of the forthcoming literary journal, Etchings.