

Growing up Asian in Australia



Edited by
Alice Pung

TEACHING NOTES BY LAURA GORDON

“The themes are rich, the writing sharp, the humour crisp and the reflections deeply moving.”—Waleed Aly, *The Sunday Age*

“A warm, ticklish, heart-wrenching, hilarious and above-all joyful romp through the childhoods of Asian-Australians.”—*Frankie*

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

Growing up Asian in Australia

Edited by Alice Pung

"These are not sociological essays, but deeply personal stories told with great literary skill. These stories show us not only what it is like to grow up Asian in Australia, but also what it means to be Asian Australian. And this is exactly the sort of book I wish I had read when I was growing up."

Alice Pung, Introduction in *Growing up Asian in Australia* (P4)

Summary

This anthology was published in 2008 and is a collection of short pieces from various people who have experienced what it is like to grow up being an Asian person in Australia. Some are set in very recent times and are filled with joy and love for their family, this country and the people they have spent their lives with. Some are stories from times past, of families torn and grieving. Many share some confusion about their identity and how they can belong. Some share memories of being isolated from two cultures, one they live in and one they have left, or have only been told about. There are stories of violence, fear and rejection. Overwhelmingly though, there are stories of love, exploration and discovery and so many of these tales are filled with humour. Alice Pung has edited the anthology and her selection of themes and categorization of these stories is an interesting talking point in itself. Her introduction is a must read of the anthology. It is impossible to teach to every story, nor is it necessary and while these notes include a brief summary of each piece that is included, many of the activities focus on a selection. The choice of which to include in your own explicit teaching is obviously determined by the interest of the teacher, and most importantly, the experience of the students.

Introduction to the text

- **Title**

Explore the meaning of the title. Consider these three questions; What ideas do the class associate with growing up? What is particular to growing up in Australia? How would being Asian affect this experience?

Divide the class into three groups and give each a human sized drawing on butcher's paper of an image relevant to each question. For example, the 'growing up' group could have the outline of a teenager, the 'Australia' group could have a map of Australia and the 'Asian' group could have the word Asian in block letters. They need to either draw, write, cartoon, cut out images, or print coloured images of everything they associate with each of these questions on their symbol. Each group can then share their answer to the question by explaining what they have added to their image.

Create a list of possible themes that might be explored in this anthology. Don't refer to the book, try and get them to offer their own suggestions based on their own experiences of what it has been like to grow up in Australia. Invite willing students to share some of these experiences, and if it is relevant, teachers may share some personal accounts of growing up in Australia in a slightly different era.

- **Stereotypes of Asian people**

As Alice Pung says in her introduction, “this collection also reveals that there is more than one voice within any given culture (and) these stories show us what it is like beyond the stereotypes”. (P2) Depending on the demographic of the particular classroom this book is being introduced to, you need to address what some of these stereotypes of “Asians” might be. Firstly consider which regions the authors of these writing pieces may come from. With respect to the people from those regions, consider what some of the stereotypes are that people who are not from those cultures may have about them. Then consider the stereotypes that are commonly held about Australian people. This would be a handy list to have displayed in the classroom as you study the text, and refer to see how many stereotypes are addressed.

- **Growing up in Australia**

Given that this is a text that is taught in senior secondary levels, many of the students studying this text would have already completed quite a few years of growing up already. Invite everyone to find a quote from the text that could be considered a common ‘growing up’ experience. (See some examples below.) Write the quote on a sticky note, with the page number and stick these on the walls of the classroom. Students then move around the room and select a quote that they feel some affinity with. It will become the opening line of a personal piece on ‘growing up in Australia’. It may be something funny, heartwarming, cruel, involve parents or school or relationships, anything that might be a common experience among children or teenagers.

These pieces could be written anonymously and entered into a box for others to read. They could be developed into an assessment piece, they could form one snapshot or perspective of an event, they could be an extended homework task, or a ten-minute writing activity. It provides plenty of flexibility and room for extension.

“I’ve been called a lot of things.” (P9)

“I always dreaded eleven o’clock on Saturday mornings.” (P16)

“I was the new animal at the zoo, fenced in by concentric throngs of teenage boys.” (P46)

“I was always angry, feeling a compulsion to withdraw and reach out at the same time.” (P48)

“One of the few benefits of working after school every day was that I became very diligent at homework. It gave me something to do to pass the time.” (P65)

“To this day I feel uncomfortable being around that area.” (P71)

“When the abuse had been directed at me, I had always wanted one of the other kids to hit Barry. I wanted someone to make it all stop, and for the first time I realized that ‘someone’ could be me”. (P78)

“An enormous amount of food would be served.” (P156)

“It was then I began to realize I could never grow up to be exactly like Wonder Woman.” (P177)

“He’s my dad. And I want to grow up to be just like him.” (P185)

“I wondered if my mum was embarrassed by me like I had so often been by her.” (P245)

- **Alice Pung's Introduction**

Read the Introduction written by Alice Pung. Students need to research her and consider why she has been asked to edit this anthology. They need to create ten 'fat' questions that they could ask Alice about the process she has gone through in selecting and organizing the text that she might have considered when writing this introduction. (A fat question often begins with why, how, what if, justify, explain, who and requires a detailed answer, rather than a brief, skinny one.) This section of the text is one that will be referred to frequently, and is certainly one that students could refer to in their final assessment. Then read the introduction again and try and capture the essence of her intention through either a poem, song, artwork or short speech.

Summary of each piece (Quick Reference)
--

Key to Classification: HR – Highly Recommend for teaching, R – Recommend BR – Background Reading, D- Difficult for some students to access.

Alice Pung – Introduction. (HR)

Some discussion on growing up, the intention of the anthology and a discussion of the themes and organization of the writing pieces.

'Strine'

Amy Choi – *The Relative Adventures of Learning My Language* (BR)

Learns to value the language of her grandparents and parents after the death of her grandfather.

Sunil Badami – *Sticks and Stones and Such-Like* (HR)

Endearing piece about how his desperation to fit in causes him to change his name. His mother finds out and reveals the true meaning behind his name.

Tom Cho – *Learning English* (BR)

Very short piece on learning English and the influence of English speaking celebrities.

Ivy Tseng – *Chinese Lessons* (BR)

The value her father had on teaching her Chinese and how much she disliked it as a child, but then learns to value it as she grows older and can no longer understand her father.

'Pioneers'

Ken Chau – *The Early Settlers* (D)

Poem on the early settlers, both Chinese and anglo-saxon and the fear they had for each other.

Ken Chau – *The Terrorists* (HR)

Poem subverting the current notion of terrorists.

Francis Lee – *The Upside-Down Year* (BR)

An international student receiving a scholarship to travel to Australia by ship to study. He never returns to Hong Kong.

Thao Nguyen *The Water Buffalo* (D)

A figurative piece very rich in imagery about the generational divide. Only for very capable students.

Christopher Cyrill – *The Ganges and its Tributaries* (D)

Story of settling in Australia and his father creating a highly detailed map of India and the surrounding regions.

Simon Tong – *The Beat of a Different Drum* (R)

The harassment that came from starting at a new school in Australia.

'Battlers'

Hop Dac – *Pigs from home* (D)

This has some confronting description of the harsh reality of farming pigs.

Annette Shun Wah – *Spiderbait* (BR)

Description of the challenging and demanding work that is chook farming. Again has some confronting images about making a living from a difficult occupation.

Lily Chan – *Take me Away, Please* (HR)

Her parents owned the only Chinese Takeaway shop in a small town and she had to work behind the counter after school.

Kevin Lai & Matt Huynh – *ABC Supermarket* (HR)

Comic format. The account of the demise of their family supermarket.

'Mates'

Aditi Gouvernel – *Wei-Lei and Me* (HR)

Uplifting account of being bullied at school, and finding an ally in another new student who gives her a reason to stand up to the bully.

Oliver Phommavanh – *Hot and Spicy* (HR)

Being the embarrassed son of Thai parents and the owners of the only Thai restaurant in town, he tries to sabotage the school lunch his parents provide the food for.

Ray Wing-Lun – *Lessons from my school years* (BR)

The son of parents who owned a fruit shop in the North Shore of Sydney. Desperate to go to school and then discovering he had to do things his own way to make sense of it all.

Tanveer Ahmed – *Exotic Rissole* (BR)

Growing up with his 'aussie' best mate and coveting his homemade rissoles. The truth is eventually revealed as they go their separate ways.

'The Folks'

Vanessa Woods – *Perfect Chinese Children* (HR)

After her Australian father divorces her Chinese mother, they grow up with less than other students. The realization that she has disappointed her mother has great significance for her.

Simone Lazaroo – *The Asian Disease* (BR)

Sitting with her father on his deathbed she reflects on how he has been made to feel that being Asian is a disease for most of his life.

Rudi Soman – *Crackers* (BR)

The story of the different ways in which her family go about catching a mouse.

Oanh Thi Tran – *Conversations with my parents* (BR)

Moving away from parents and having very brief conversations where the important things are left out.

Bon-Wai Chou – *The Year of the Rooster* (BR)

The loss of her father.

Mia Francis – *Are you different?* (HR)

As parents they adopted a child from the Philippines and she wonders how well she did at exposing him to his culture of origin.

'The Clan'

Benjamin Law – *Tourism* (HR)

A funny piece on visiting amusement parks and other entertainment venues.

Ken Chau – *The Family Tree* (HR)

Poem on the role of women in Asian culture.

Ken Chau – *The Firstborn* (D)

A poem on being the firstborn in the family.

Diem Vo – *Family Life* (R)

The family owns a video store and this piece reveals the drinking and camaraderie that comes from having lots of relatives nearby.

Ken Chan – *Quarrel* (BR)

The ongoing feud between the grandmother and grandfather and the impact this has on the family.

HaiHa Le – *Ginseng Tea and a Pair of Thongs* (D)

Recalls the life and experience of his parents.

'Legends'

Phillip Tang – *Teenage Dreamers* (BR)

Spending time with his father who predicts the death of their idol.

Shalini Akhil – *Destiny* (HR)

Realisation that she can only become a different kind of Wonder Woman.

Cindy Pan – *Dancing Lessons* (BR)

Having her Dad teach her to dance as he reminisces about his idols.

Chin Shen – *Papa Bear* (HR)

Very funny account of his father and all his quirks.

Glenn Lieu & Matt Huynh – *A New Challenger* (BR)

Graphic account of hanging around the arcade games after school.

'The Hots'

Benjamin Law – *Towards Manhood* (BR)

As a gay teenager he spends his teenage years worried that he is not manly enough.

Chi Vu – *The Lover in the Fish Sauce* (D)

A confusing figurative tale about two young lovers and the different backgrounds they came from.

Xerxes Matza – *The Embarrassments of the Gods* (BR)

Lots of sexual references about the men in his family.

Lian Low – *My First Kiss* (BR)

Hiding her secret affinity with KD Lang and dealing with being gay.

Jenny Kee – *A Big Life* (D)

Reflections on her sexual awakening during the 1960's.

'UnAustralian?'

Uyen Loewald – *Be Good, Little Migrants* (HR)

Excellent poem on the irony of this mindset.

Leanne Hall – *How to be Japanese* (HR)

Struggling with her Chinese heritage, especially as she worked as a model for a Japanese beer company at one stage.

Tony Ayres – *Silence* (HR)

A gay man on the receiving end of a violent, racist outburst, and the shame in how he handled it.

James Chong – *Anzac Day* (HR)

A boy marches proudly on Anzac Day before he is targeted and questioned as being 'true blue'.

Mei Yen Chua – *Special Menu* (D)

An interesting take on some traditional menus.

Michelle Law – *A Call to Arms* (HR)

A family holiday to Hong Kong where she feels some sense of belonging and realizes she has embarrassed her mother.

Joo-Inn Chew – *Chinese Dancing, Bendigo Style* (BR)

Growing up in a country town.

'Tall Poppies'

Interviews with a range of Asian-Australians who have been very successful in a diverse range of fields.

'Leaving Home'

Diana Nguyen – *Five ways to disappoint your Vietnamese mother* (HR)

A heart-wrenching description of how to do exactly as the title suggests.

Pauline Nguyen – *The Courage of Soldiers* (D)

Very sensitive material about the extensive abuse at the hands of her father. Worth reading depending on the class.

Paul Nguyen – *You Can't Choose Your Memories* (D)

Very difficult read about losing his father at a young age and having a poor relationship with his mother who eventually rejects him when he tells her he is gay.

Emily J. Sun – *These are the photographs we take* (D)

Confronting piece about the turn a life can take when getting mixed up with the wrong kind of people.

'Homecoming'

Kylie Kwong – *My China* (BR)

A world-renowned chef, she returns to the village of her family to cook a feast for them all to join in.

Blossom Beeby – *The Face in the Mirror* (BR)

She was adopted as a baby from Korea and eventually returns to find her origins.

Jacqui Larkin – *Baked Beans and Burnt Toast* (HR)

A beautiful piece on returning her father's ashes to his homeland, Hong Kong. Her first trip there makes her feel as out of place as she did when she first started school.

Sim Shen – *Hanoi and Other Homes* (BR)

Going to Vietnam to work and reflecting on how his own unborn child will have a mix of ancestry.

Themes

The 12 Themes of the Text

Divide students into twelve groups, one for each theme. Before they become really familiar with the stories from each theme and the common messages, characters and symbols of each, ask them to make some predictions. Each group creates a Mind Map of their theme and considers what might feature in the stories from their theme. These should include the title and it's meaning, common characters, experiences, settings, struggles, symbols and glimmers of hope. Set a few stories from each theme, based on the guide above, and ask them to read these ones and then make another Mind Map with the answers to these topics. They need to present their findings to the class over a few lessons as the rest of the class read the set stories for each theme. This will create a sound compilation of notes for each theme.

Context Preparation

As this text is one of the set texts for Year 12 English Context; Identity and Belonging, many of the tasks are preparation for this final writing piece. The following writing tasks are exactly intended for this.

- For each theme, find a key quote that sums up the essence of the message behind those writing selections. Turn it into a prompt. Then turn the prompt into an image. Create a class list of the best prompts and images for each theme. Students need to select either an image or a quote for each theme and come up with an idea for a writing piece.
- Create a new theme. Give it a title that follows the philosophy of the other titles, as explained in the Introduction. Select five stories that would fit with that theme and write a paragraph that mimics Alice Pung's style for her introduction to explain the choice of writing pieces.
- Write each theme on an A4 sheet and put it on a wall around the room. Ask the students a series of questions and invite them to vote with their feet and then call on some students to justify their response. For example; which of the sections is the most uplifting, which is the saddest, which resonates with you the strongest, which is furthest from your own experience, which did you enjoy reading the most, which was the most difficult or uncomfortable?
- Find another successful Asian-Australian and write a piece suitable for 'Tall Poppies'.
- Choose five stories each from a different theme. Write five questions you would like to ask the author to reveal more about the inspiration for this piece. Take on an alternative perspective, a silence from this piece and tell their story.

Engaging with the Text

- **Close Analysis (write a description and give sample stories)**

Identity and Belonging

This text is one of four selected to explore the theme of Identity and Belonging in the Year 12 English section Writing in Context (Creating and Presenting). The theme runs through most of the stories in this anthology and is at the core of many people's experience of 'growing up'. The sense of identity for many of the characters is tied to their culture, or the culture their parents have passed on to them. Some of these people like Francis Lee in *An Upside-Down Year* have arrived in Australia as a foreign place, but one of promise and hope and opportunity. Many others, including Michelle Law in *A Call to Arms*, are born in this country and yet it doesn't feel as a place they belong to for some time. Many of the writers describe how their identity is connected to appearance and that sense of looking different, yet not feeling different until the taunts of the school yard make it painfully clear. This difference undermines any chance of fitting in and damages many possible connections to others. It is stories like *Exotic Rissole* and *Wei-Lei and Me* that reveal just how much human connection can define oneself and help to bring meaning to the cruel world around them. *Baked Beans and Burnt Toast* uses

imagery and language beautifully to show how you might never feel like you really belong until someone reaches out to include you.

Generational difference

The sacrifice of the generation that arrived here, desperate for a new life with more possibility for their children, is not lost on the writers, the recipients of such sacrifice. Many writing pieces offer gratitude for the intention of their parents to offer them so much more than these parents could have ever dreamed of for themselves. They feel the weight of expectation heavily, like Cindy Pan, whose father believes she can be the first person to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in every category. And they please and disappoint parents in equal amounts. Vanessa Woods and Diana Nguyen both feel the overwhelming disapproval of failing in the eyes of their mothers, while Shalini Akhil is blessed with the acceptance of a grandmother who helps her consider what sort of Wonder Woman she might grow up to become. The sexual awakening of teenagers also causes the wrath of some parents who are horrified at the news their son or daughter is gay. This rejection has lasting and tragic consequences on these relationships. The typical embarrassment that teenagers feel toward their parents knows no cultural limitations, and for some of these writers, their difference was only exacerbated by the food, language, expectations, occupations and traditions their parents had. And like many teenagers, it is only time and the cycle of life that softens this

Death and Loss

This anthology shares many precious memories of loved ones who have passed away. These writers share their pain and the futile realization that comes with the loss of someone so significant. Regret features prominently in many of these stories as the longing for just one more conversation, particularly in a common language, becomes out of reach. The demise of a parent or a grandparent can be a powerful reminder of the culture that is part of them, yet now even further out of reach. Ivy Tseng shares the passionate dislike of the “Chinese lessons” her father inflicts upon her teenage self. As she sits at the bedside of her dying father she is filled with regret that those lessons weren’t valued more as now all she wants is to “understand (her) father”. The passing of this generation who straddled two cultures, kept traditions alive and grappled with two languages is felt even more keenly with the arrival of their own children, or a return to a country that filled the stories of their childhood. They finally see first hand, as Kylie Kwong does, the place of her parents’ youth, their own connection to that distant land takes on new meaning.

Responsibility and Expectation

Growing up is often about meeting the expectations of those around you so that you can belong, identify and be accepted as part of the group. When the expectations of your family, directly contradict what the other teenagers or children are doing, then growing up becomes even more of a minefield to navigate. These writers share many recollections of the horrid and cruel bullying they are exposed to in the school-yard. Their painful memories become even more poignant with the beauty of hindsight to recall them. Daily torture at school only ends for many with their after school occupations running their parents restaurants. And of course study must take priority over them all. For many of the Asian-Australians that feature in the chapter ‘Tall Poppies’, their endeavours reap rewards as they achieve success in the fields they have labored away in. But for others, even fitting in to the Australian way of life is still not enough to feel accepted. James Chong shares his story of *Anzac Day* and the pride he felt marching on that national day, until he features in the media with the headline “True

Blue?'. Perhaps the best summary of the challenge of meeting the expectations of a nation is in Uyen Loewald's poem *Be Good, Little Migrants*. He articulates the contradiction so well.

- **Writing Tasks**

1. Select a title from the anthology and write a new piece of writing, fact or fiction, that explores the title in an alternative way.
2. Select a style to mimic and write an original piece of writing, but one that uses the style, language and features of this piece. The key to this is selecting a story that has something notable about the way it is written.
3. Choose a place that has a significant meaning for your childhood. Describe the place in as much detail as possible, consider sights, smells, sounds, emotions as well as a narrative about a specific experience there.
4. The generational divide is a frequently recurring idea in many of these pieces. Select either an event from one of the stories, or from your own 'growing up' and retell the event from three different generations. Consider the silences of each generation, what each different age group would value and judge, and the language that would differentiate between each.

Assessment

- **Previous Exam Topics**

VCAA English Exam 2010

'Having a sense of being different makes it difficult to belong.'

VCAA English Exam 2011

'Without connection to others there is no *me*.'

VCAA English Exam 2012

'Each person has different identities for different relationships and situations.'

- **Analytical Responses**

Students could take on the persona of many of the writers featured in the anthology and write analytical pieces on a recent event or issue. These could take the form of letters to the editor, columns, opinion pieces, speeches or blog entries. They could respond to other pieces that have been published, comments that have been made or an experience they have recently shared. Using many of the writing tasks that have been mentioned, students could develop extended pieces of writing that address the prompts for this context.

- **Creative Responses**

The creative possibilities are endless and need to be carefully guided, particularly in preparation for the final exam. However, there are many learning activities and writing tasks that can explore the creative responses to these themes and ideas and still may lead to an analytical response. One possible style is 'snapshots'. This is where the same event is told by a number of alternative perspectives. Or each voice can pick up the narrative where the last voice

finished and so the story is told progressively through different voices. The event can come directly from one of the pieces, or can be inspired by one that is referred to.

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 *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*.