

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

***Unpolished Gem* by Alice Pung**

YEAR 10 - 11

Background

When we came here my family were in awe of everything. Every little thing was incredible, like a wonderland, but the more you aspire towards being white middle class, the more you suffer internally. The Age, September 3rd, 2006

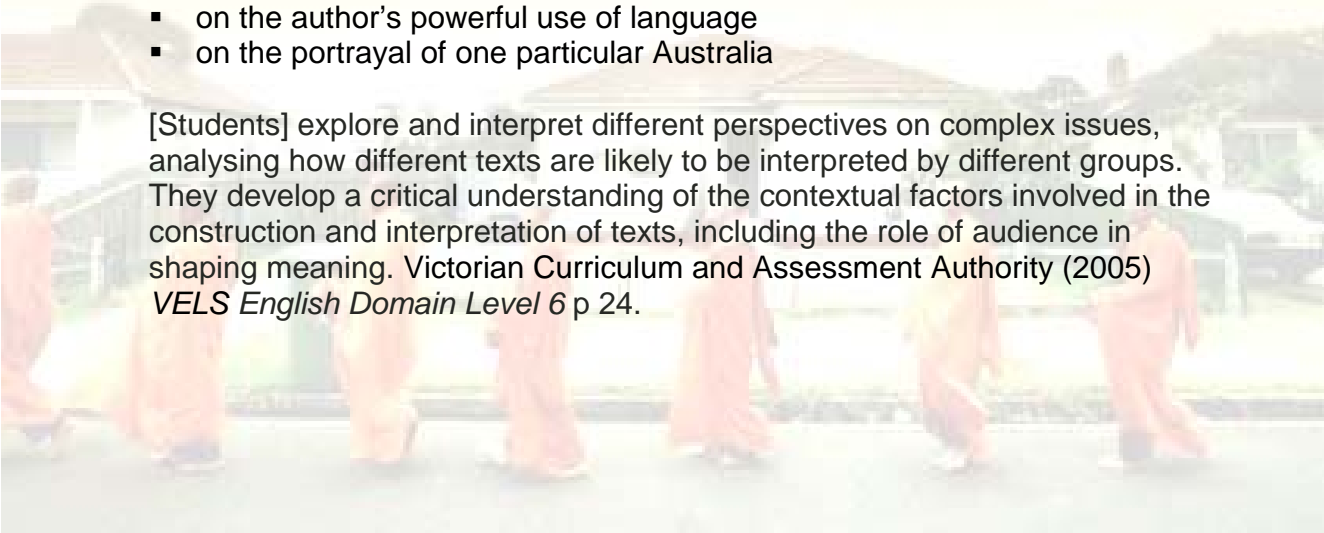
Beginning in the 1980s, *Unpolished Gem* is a beautifully written, painful search for identity across two cultures, but is also very funny and life affirming. Unlike many other stories of immigration this one does not finish once successful settlement is achieved, but takes a longitudinal view – we follow Agheare/Alice from birth to university and through the conflicts that arise once the initial appeal of a more affluent society has worn off. For a mainstream Australian reader, *Unpolished Gem* allows entrée into a different way of looking at a lot of what is taken for granted. It is also a challenging view of mainstream society, its values and attitudes towards newcomers.

Pung writes in a style that captures the idiom of Australian speech along with lyricism, as she documents her family's integration into Australian society, and her personal journey. Touching, funny and vivid, this shifts the reader between cultures – the ethnic Chinese/Cambodian diaspora in Melbourne, and the former life of her parents and grandparents in Phnom Penh. On one level it is to be read for the absolute pleasure to be taken in the writing – lively, rich, visual, powerful and moving, as well as for its portrayal of one, particular, sharply caught Australia.

Objectives

There are two focuses for this unit of work:

- on the author's powerful use of language
- on the portrayal of one particular Australia



[Students] explore and interpret different perspectives on complex issues, analysing how different texts are likely to be interpreted by different groups. They develop a critical understanding of the contextual factors involved in the construction and interpretation of texts, including the role of audience in shaping meaning. Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English Domain Level 6* p 24.



Context Setting

- Read aloud the prologue to capture the colourful atmosphere of the market and the interaction between Alice's father, the stall holders and other customers.
- The dialogue, (eg p2) the descriptions of cultural practices (p25, pp82-83), the misunderstandings (eg pp 11-12), the implied values all convey a particular place and community within a broader Australian culture.
- Are there stories that have shaped your family - places, things, experiences or people that are pivotal to how the family sees itself or how members are perceived?

Focus: Language

Pung shows us clearly how powerful language can be in helping us communicate. She also makes it very clear that it can exclude and divide us from even those close to us. For example:

- 'words with bones' p 36, learning English and losing Chinese pp 142-146
- Humour p63, 'Mao Bin Uni' p233

Focus: One particular Australia

Pung evokes vividly the experience of living between two cultures.

- For instance, the duality or conflict within this one view of Australia is evidenced in the phrase 'Banana children' p214.
- Obeying Chinese cultural values yet living in a western world. Consider the descriptions of the changing
 - clothes
 - homes
 - knick knacks



Assessment

Pung's writing is vivid and evocative and ideal as a model to inspire creativity and playfulness with language.

- Create a Portfolio that captures your response to the language in *Unpolished Gem*. Collect examples of Pung's
 - Humour
 - Descriptions of suburbs as suggested by their names p. 234
 - Descriptions of people
 - Sayings
 - The discussions she has in her head
- Script a piece of reader's theatre around ideas from the text.

Further Reading

Cunxin, Li *Mao's Last Dancer*

Farewell my Concubine (film) from the original novel by Lilian Lee

Na, An *A Step from Heaven*

Ung, Luong *Lucky Child*

Ung, Luong *First they Killed my Father*

Wu Ch'êng-ên *Monkey*, translated from the Chinese by Arthur Waley

Yang, Gene Luen *American Born Chinese*.

Other Australias

Abdel-Fattah, Randa *Does my Head Look Big in This?*

Abdel-Fattah, Randa *Ten Things I Hate About Me*

Fusillo, Archimede *The Dons*

Fusillo, Archimede *Sparring with Shadows*

Horniman, Joanne *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*

Marchetta, Melina *Looking for Alibrandi*

McCarthy, Maureen *Queen Kat, Carmel and St Jude get a Life*

Savvides, Irini *Aliki Says*

