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Funny, horrifying, and sharp as a serpent's fangs."

John Marsden

A blue and white plaid skirt with a button at the waist, centered against a yellow background. The skirt is pleated and has a white button at the waist.

Laurinda

ALICE PUNG

TEACHING NOTES BY LAURA GORDON

“Alice Pung totally nails it with *Laurinda*. Funny, horrifying and as sharp as a serpent’s fangs.” – *John Marsden*

“Pung continues to impress with her nuanced storytelling; *Laurinda* will surely resonate with anyone who remembers the cliquey, hierarchical nature of the playground.” – *The Sunday Age*

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Laurinda

By Alice Pung

Setting

Laurinda is a novel of contrast. It is a story about growing up in a place that you are desperate to leave behind, and trying to understand another world that you never knew existed. Lucy Lam lives in Stanley, “a place where many people work in banking and advertising – that is, their mums clean banks and their brothers put Safeway ads into mailboxes” (p330). It was not a place people strive to get in to, but rather struggle to get out of. For Lucy’s family, it was going to happen through sheer hard work and now possibly for her, through an opportunity at the prestigious ladies college Laurinda. Set in the 1990s, with numerous references to the icons of the time, and with an obvious absence of any social media, Pung demonstrates that while society might have changed significantly in the last twenty years, being a teenage girl has always been difficult. Especially if you attend Laurinda. The key to surviving adolescence is not forgetting where you came from, or the people who love you, but having a very clear focus on where you want to be.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

1. Contrast as many of the descriptions for Stanley and Laurinda as you can find. Draw one symbol that represents each place and the class and culture it represents.
2. Write a description of your home town. What are the characteristics that define it and make it unique from surrounding suburbs? Try and use the colourful description and figurative language Pung uses in her novel. Describe the heart of the town.
3. Have a class competition for students to identify iconic references in this text that were particular to teenagers in the eighties and nineties, e.g. The Baby-sitters Club books.

Characters

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

Character Questions:

Specific to each character and listed below.

Character Mood Board:

Divide the students into groups and assign a character to each group. Drawing on their own notes on the text, list of quotes and discussion, invite students to create a mood board for their character. This should include images, quotes, symbols, description, relationship to other characters and development of the character throughout the novel. Provide each

group with a large piece of chipboard and have them create and collect a range of material to display on the board. This detail is then presented to the class and the students explain their choices and interpretation based on textual evidence. They may sketch, write, cut out pictures, source Internet, material etc.

Students then individually summarise the collection. In a written piece they detail how their mood board explains the choices, development and relationships that character has demonstrated. A creative writing piece could follow.

Lucy (Linh) Lam

"The difference, I recognised, was that I was well liked and Tully wasn't." (p19)

"This was the first time – the first time! – since arriving at Laurinda that I had felt anything like the spontaneity and fun that I had felt back at Christ Our Saviour." (p212)

"The one thing I wanted to do was hold him again." (p273)

"I learned that to have integrity means piecing together all the separate parts of yourself and your life." (p336)

"I am grateful that I carry a little piece of Stanley with me wherever I go, wherever I end up." (p336)

Lucy is the author of a very long, year-long, letter to someone called Linh. It is someone she has left behind, someone who has been her sounding board, her solace and her reminder of what really matters. It might take readers a long time to realise that Linh and Lucy are not in fact two different people, but the divide in Lucy's personality that she is trying to resolve. Lucy is a Vietnamese refugee. She has surprised everyone, including herself, by winning the inaugural 'Equal Access' scholarship to the prestigious Ladies College, Laurinda, "which were supposed to go to kids with parents the school considered povvo" (p8). She is excited and hopeful, despite feeling guilty that Tully didn't get in. Lucy's mother spends her days and nights in the family garage sewing. Her father works long hours at the Victory Carpet Factory and her beloved little brother, Lamb, is cared for by all of them between work and school commitments. Lucy's father knows what Stanley holds for his daughter's future and it is bleak. He is delighted at this chance to get out of the suburb that holds them all back. And even more delighted when she is invited to parties and to study at the Leslie family mansion. What he doesn't know is the unhappiness Lucy experiences. She can cope with the academic demands, doesn't mind that she has few friends and delights in being tutored by Mrs Leslie. But as the undercurrent of popularity and power rears its ugly head, Lucy feels trapped. This is not supposed to happen amongst people as wealthy and educated as the girls and their families from Laurinda. How different is this world where teachers don't hold the power, but rather three girls, their mothers and their families' money, determine who is weak and must be culled. It is too much for Lucy. Lamb nearly dies of an asthma attack, Ms Vanderwerp never returns to class and she witnesses the Cabinet break a girl's hand. Lucy retreats. She has abandoned the only friend she made and finally at breaking point, abuses

Amber and Brodie and Chelsea in the yard, with Mr Sinclair as her witness. But it is because of her mother, with her own experience of survival and resilience, and the encouragement from Katie to stand her ground, that Lucy returns to Laurinda. Her final speech at the Valedictory dinner is a triumph. She has undermined the authority of Mrs Grey by speaking about Laurinda in a way only the principal would truly understand and finally stamping her integrity and individuality on her place at this college. She will not stand idly by; she will lead instead.

1. **At what point do you realise that Linh is not separate to Lucy? How does this impact on your reading of the text?**
2. **How does Lucy feel about Stanley? What does she learn from growing up in a place like this?**
3. **Explain the relationship Lucy has with each member of her family. What are the turning points in each of these?**
4. **Why does Lucy abandon Katie? Was this fair?**
5. **Describe the development of the relationship between Mrs Leslie and Lucy from the first meeting to the Valedictory Dinner.**
6. **Why is Lucy so emotional in her meeting with Ms Vanderwerp? What is resolved in this conversation?**
7. **Who makes a greater impression on Lucy, Mrs Grey, Mr Sinclair or Ms Vanderwerp?**
8. **At what point does Lucy decide enough is enough?**
9. **Find a quote that most accurately summarises her journey through this year of school.**

Mother – Quyen Lam

“This was a woman who had never picked up a book in her life; the only literature she looked at was the BI-LO and Safeway ads that arrived in our letterbox every Tuesday. Yet her fingertips could read that piece of polyester fibre like a blind person read Braille.” (p12)

“For her, happiness was hoarding seventeen tins of sweetened condensed milk in the cupboard. We drank our coffee in silence.” (p18)

“My mother’s point was this: be vigilant and be silent. It was almost our family motto.” (p289)

Lucy’s mother is significant in defining the kind of woman Lucy wants to become. It is not through her actions or her encouragement, but it is through her experiences and examples. Lucy will not spend her adult days in the garage of their modest family home sewing until all hours of the night in order to make some extra money for their family to survive on. She is likely to be university educated and working in a professional career. Quyen’s job is described as unskilled labour, but as Pung points out very clearly, while it is certainly

laborious, it is a highly skilled task that few could master with the speed and accuracy she manages. Not only does her Mum sew, but she also cares for Lucy's baby brother, affectionately known as Lamb. As she busily meets deadline after deadline, Lamb sits in his cardboard box on the floor in the garage happily amusing himself and watching his mother sew. Lucy provides his escape to the outdoors; she is his light and his laughter. Quyen is not fussed with entertaining the child; she doesn't have the luxury of being able to do this. She must cook and sew and provide for her family. Lucy describes her as not really having friends and travelling to the next suburb in order to get fresher produce for a cheaper price. She makes delicious Vietnamese food and happily sets the newspapers out on the floor each night to eat off. She is not so much a 'tiger mum' as a typical Asian mother; harsh in criticism with high expectations and no tolerance for the frivolous time-wasting typical of most teenage girls. And while there is little tenderness displayed between the mother and daughter, it is her mother she chooses to write about in her scholarship exam essay. It is her mother who drags her out of her depression and it is her mother who shows her that anyone can reinvent themselves and fight adversity. Her mother has shown her that you can overcome everything, even pirates invading a rickety boat, if you are "vigilant and silent." Lucy can't manage the silence, but she has certainly inherited, and learnt, her tenacity.

1. **What are your first impressions of Mrs Lam? Support with evidence.**
2. **Describe the relationship Lucy has with her mother during the first half of the novel.**
3. **Why does she not tell her mother of Mrs Leslie's invitation to cook for the women?**
4. **How does Quyen feel about Lucy winning the scholarship? Describe the scene where the letter arrives. How do you think she describes the situation to neighbours and family?**
5. **What is the turning point for Lucy's mum? What do we learn about her from the job offer?**
6. **Explain the gesture of giving Lucy \$25 to get ready for the Valedictory Dinner.**

Father – Warwick Lam

"He wanted me to get out of Stanley. He wanted me out of there for my own good. Where we lived was not a place where good stories began, but a place where bad stories retreated, like small mongrel dogs bitten by much larger, thoroughbred ones." (p6)

Lucy's father works at the local Victory Carpet Factory. He knows how hard life is in a place like Stanley and he desperately wants his daughter to get out of there. Unlike her mother, Warwick Lam encourages his daughter to study hard and earn herself a scholarship to a school that will lead her away from this place of broken dreams. So when the letter arrives with news that Laurinda has accepted Lucy, Warwick tells everyone he knows of his daughter's achievement. On the day of the interview he takes time off work to accompany Lucy to this school that promises her a better life. The language barrier and Warwick's

mistaken assumption that the sandstone is rendering do not impede his sense of pride and hope in this college for ladies. He believes in education as a way of escaping the inevitable and improving one's situation. Similarly, he is delighted to drive Lucy to Amber's party and collect her from the Leslie's after she has supposedly been studying. He sees this as Lucy making friends and fitting in, adapting to her new environment. But what is interesting about Warwick is his response to Lucy's dissatisfaction at this new school. He acknowledges that these 'friends' will not be people she associates with outside of school. He cannot see the immediate problem, or else is deliberately ignoring it. The present state doesn't matter; the future is what counts. He lives his own life with this perspective and has no appreciation for the intensity of being a teenage girl. Lucy is absolutely right when she says: "a year is longer" when you are fifteen. The future seems a distant and remote possibility. And then Lamb gets sick and the present very much matters. Warwick's response to this is to protect his family. He suggests that Quyen stop working and care for the family, in spite of the years this might set them back financially. Then he improves on that and finds her a job that is safer, cleaner, earns more money and allows Quyen to learn some English. He has provided for his family once again and their future looks a little brighter.

1. **What feeling do you get about the relationship Lucy has with her father from the opening of the text?**
2. **Why is education so important to Mr Lam?**
3. **How does Lucy use humour to show the language barrier without denigrating her father's character? Why is this significant?**
4. **What is Warwick's response to the Leslie home?**
5. **What is different about Lucy's father and her mother and the way each parent her? What lessons does she learn from each one?**
6. **How do you feel about Warwick's reaction to Lamb's illness? What does it reveal about his love for his family?**
7. **What is best piece of advice he gives his daughter?**

Stanley girls: Yvonne, Ivy and Tully

"I felt sorry for Tully. The way her mother was dragging her to the gym by the elbow, it was as if she was heading for the firing squad." (p8)

"Ivy and Yvonne had been such close friends since Year Seven that they had identical haircuts." (p9)

These girls have such a close bond because of the way they don't fit in with the others. They commiserate with each other about the ridiculously high expectations their parents put on them and the threats of being returned to the mother country to get "cheap eyelid surgery/nose jobs and/or husbands." (p9) Ivy, Tully and Lucy are all of Vietnamese decent, while Yvonne's parents are from Malta. They have grown up together in Stanley, attending the local Catholic school. The novel opens with the four of them being forced to sit the

scholarship exam for Laurinda. Each knows Tully will be awarded the scholarship, “she was like an Olympic gymnast who had been training for this moment her entire life”, (p11) but each sat the exam and did the best they could. After all, Laurinda was a ticket out of their existing lives, and their dads had paid the \$60 fee. Unlike Ivy and Yvonne who know they don’t really stand a chance, and don’t really mind, Tully is a nervous wreck. The pressure she feels from her parents is palpable to all of the girls; none more so than Lucy who sits behind her and watches her ask for a second booklet. And so when it is announced that it is not in fact Tully who has been accepted by Laurinda, but Lucy, everyone is shocked, especially Lucy; no one had “imagined Tully being left behind”. (p19) According to Mrs Grey, the principal, they “frown upon coached students” (p22) and were instead looking for girls who were well-rounded. The guilt Lucy feels for being accepted over Tully starts to dissipate and she cannot help but daydream about her future at Laurinda. Her final term with her friends is filled with the typical lame jokes and harmless jeering toward her teachers. These girls are not lying when they say they will miss her, but Lucy doesn’t ever really say it in return. It is not until she spends time at Laurinda that she comes to appreciate the simplicity of true friendship and being accepted for who you are.

1. **Why does everyone assume Tully will get the scholarship? How does her exam answer support this?**
2. **What is revealed about the four girls in their responses to the image for the essay?**
3. **What unites them?**
4. **Why is Linh referred to but never spoken to? At what point did you realise she was not a separate character?**
5. **How do the relationships these girls have with their teachers differ to the girls at Laurinda?**
6. **What is surprising about Lucy’s chance meeting with Tully on the bus? How do you think Tully would have coped at Laurinda?**
7. **What is the significance of Tully wearing trousers?**

Katie

“With very long hair braided into a plait and a Madeira-cake face flecked with freckles.”
(p39)

“On that first day at lunchtime, I found my first friend.” (p56)

“And here was Katie, proposing something radical: that she would support whichever self I needed to be out in the world.” (p305)

Katie is the first friend Lucy makes at Laurinda. She sits beside this girl in homeroom and at lunchtime Katie finds Lucy and gives her the real tour of Laurinda. She shows her the parts of the school that principals don’t stop at, but students need to know. And she explains the Cabinet. Katie is a loner and Lucy soon realises it is because she doesn’t stop talking. Lucy

doesn't seem to mind very much. She is just as happy to soak up all of the insight Katie offers into this new place. But even early on Lucy can see through some of the tradition and ritual that Katie subscribes to. The way the Cabinet parade through the school, holding every single girl in the palm of their hand, seems satirical to Lucy. But to Katie, they are the epitome of the Laurinda spirit. They are everything she hopes she could be, but knows she never could. And while Brodie, Chelsea and Amber are likened to characters from *Mean Girls*, Katie is compared to a character from a 1950s children's book. Her desperation to be accepted and never-ending conversation is tolerable to Lucy, but not particularly endearing. Her blind loyalty to the Cabinet is the breaking point for their friendship, as unlike everyone else, Lucy has not succumbed to the charms of the Cabinet through years of exposure. She sees them differently and when Lucy calls Katie at home to rely on her for support, the response she gets infuriates her. Her racist retort is the last straw and as Lucy withdraws to the library Katie reverts back to the loner she was and the Cabinet continue to wield their power. Their reunion at the end of the novel is indicative of the shift in power. Lucy has resisted the Cabinet, all their charm and threats and games, and in doing so has empowered every other girl who has become the audience to the pranks of these girls. They do not have to admire, or even tolerate; they can finally resist. The game is over. Katie's relationship to Richard the Lionheart is a comment on what kind of boy he might turn out to be. He is not related to Amber or Chelsea or Brodie after all.

1. **Why does Katie befriend Lucy? What does this relationship reveal about Lucy's character?**
2. **Why does Lucy liken her to a character in a 1950s novel? What impact is this intended to have on the reader?**
3. **Are you surprised by Katie's response on the phone to Lucy? Why?**
4. **What is Mrs Leslie's impression of Katie? Where does this stem from? How does this impact on the way we view Katie?**
5. **What eventually sparks the change in Katie?**

The Cabinet: Amber, Chelsea and Brodie

"Amber's beauty was so distracting that she didn't need to develop much of a personality." (p58)

"Then she swung her body around and gave the broken door a swift and sharp and forceful kick – a very hard one – and then came a sound I would never forget, like when you snap apart a cooked chicken wing." (p227)

"Brodie did not smile very often, but when she did, it was not an invitation to friendship but a signal to ward off closeness." (p58)

The Cabinet are a Laurindan tradition. They have existed for many generations at this prestigious ladies college and while their purpose may have been more gracious once, in the

current climate, they have a very clear role to play: they maintain the status quo. With the unheralded support of the principal, the three girls who comprise the current Cabinet ensure that dissention is eradicated. Mrs Grey has a very clear idea about the kind of girls Laurinda will develop, and anyone who gets in the way of this is taken down. Teachers are not exempt. Lucy learns in her first few days at Laurinda, that “mistakes meant annihilation”. (p46) If these girls and their money-wielding parents had any issue with a teacher at this school, then this teacher did not stand a chance. The malicious prank they play on the unsuspecting Ms Vanderwerp is cruelty at its peak. Brodie, Amber and Chelsea have no interest in the life of this woman; they view her as weak and incompetent and for that she is punished. The tampon is a symbol of vicious retribution teenage girls will inflict on those who challenge their authority. The mark they receive of a B+ for overtly stealing Katie’s idea is met with incredulity and then resistance. But when Ms Vanderwerp refuses to revoke the mark, even at the insistence of both parents and principal, the girls take matters into their own hands. And their “vile act of bullying” (p101) does not stop there. Gina’s lies about Mr Sinclair are an extension of these girls who are “insulated [by] privilege” (p104) and their skewed sense of justice. Chelsea kicking the toilet door in, with the intention of breaking Trisha’s hand, is evil. These girls have no regard whatsoever for people’s lives outside of this school yard. And the most disturbing part is not the support of the administration that relies on the donations of their parents to fund the prestige and privilege, but the blind acceptance from the student body. Lucy is the only one to resist. But after hurling obscenities at these girls across the yard, even Lucy retreats. Her brother is ill, her confidence is shattered and her dream of a different future is now tainted by what this alternative world offers. It is Katie, and the other long-suffering students of Laurinda who enable her to find it within herself to maintain her integrity, challenge the power these girls are gradually losing, and make her own mark on Laurinda. Lucy watches as the Cabinet starts collapsing, “the glass had fallen off the hatch and people were climbing out”. (p311)

1. **Describe each of the girls and your first impression of them.**
2. **Are any of these girls likeable? Is there anything redeeming about any of them?**
3. **Do you hold them responsible for their behaviour, or are they a product of their school and their family values?**
4. **Which of the pranks is the vilest? Why?**
5. **How does your perspective of the girls change after the lunch conversation between their mothers?**
6. **Are they racist?**
7. **Is this situation realistic? Do girls like this exist? Why does power and popularity poison girls so often?**
8. **What will happen to these girls in Year 11?**

Mrs Leslie

"Mrs Leslie, my remedial English teacher, was the most attractive older lady I had ever seen." (p75)

"It dawned on me, as I watched the three older women together, that they had known each other since they were at Laurinda – and that perhaps they had even been the Cabinet of their day." (p169)

Mrs Leslie becomes Lucy's tangible link to the other side, to a future life outside of Stanley. She is perfumed and educated, clever and engaging and the mother of Amber Leslie. The conversations Lucy has with Mrs Leslie expose her to a world of literature she has never known and enable her to develop her English skills just as Mrs Grey had intended. But there is more to this relationship. Mrs Grey wants more for Lucy than just an improvement in her grades; she wants her to understand the Laurindan spirit, and what better way to do this than immerse her in the life of a true Larindan. Mrs Leslie takes a shine to Lucy and genuinely wants her to do well, but there is an element of condescension toward Lucy, and of her becoming Mrs Leslie's project. The invitation to Mrs Lam to come and cook for her friends as a way of teaching them a new skill is so absurd to Lucy she doesn't even bother to share it with her mother. After all, how could her mother possibly give up a day of work for the pleasure of these women vaguely interested in getting some 'culture'? The invitation to Amber's party seems like evidence this new school is creating the new life for Lucy her father had hoped for, but she is under no illusion that she is "a charity invite". (p152) The excess and privilege of the life of Amber, her friends and their families is exacerbated at the cooking lesson. As it dawns on Lucy that these girls are mirroring the life their mothers have lived, bitchiness and all, it becomes clear what it really means to be a Laurindan. Lucy realises that she is just like her father and had, until now, "believed that educated people were gentler and kinder than the uncouth and unlearned masses". (p174) But as the pranks of years past are recalled with hysterical laughter, the shine of all this privilege and wealth quickly wears off.

1. Describe the way Lucy feels about having a tutor for remedial English and how this changes once she meets Mrs Leslie.
2. What metaphor does Gatsby hold for Lucy's own situation?
3. What is so appealing about Mrs Leslie? Is there a moment when the shine of her appeal begins to fade?
4. How do you feel toward Mrs Leslie during the conversation with her friends during the cooking lesson?
5. What does the fifty dollars represent? What do we learn about the characters in this exchange?
6. What would Mrs Leslie have made of Lucy's valedictory speech?

Mrs Grey

“And with those words, it hit me that she was the only adult here who knew what I was really capable of ... Mrs Grey appreciated that my ambitions were larger than even I had recognised ... She was the only person in this room who had peered into my heart and recognised my dark and secret need to be acknowledged.” (p334)

During the first meeting with Mrs Grey at Laurinda, Lucy and her father are completely intimidated by everything this school has to offer, until Mrs Grey explains to Lucy why she was awarded the scholarship. The tour of the prestigious school does more than identify the beautiful buildings and rich history. It offers promise of a different future for Lucy, for her family. But it turns out not to be the future, or the journey, Lucy had expected. To be a student of Laurinda, you were expected to achieve, and also conform. As Mrs Grey indicates clearly in the very first interview, establishing acceptable behaviour is part of the tradition of Laurinda. There is no need for a Student Representative Council here; Laurinda has their own version of listening to the voices of the students, and often money speaks the loudest. It seems that Mrs Grey sets the tone for what is acceptable at Laurinda. But in fact the Cabinet seem to hold equal sway. Ms Vanderwerp’s removal comes at the hands of their callous prank. Mrs Grey is called to calm the nonsense that erupts in Mr Sinclair’s classroom. While she may present a professional, taciturn demeanour to the students in this school, she is in fact completely involved in everything. The Cabinet report to her, they fulfil her requests. Their power comes from being untouchable. Mrs Grey has created this. And like everyone else in her care at Laurinda, Lucy does not escape her scrutiny or ‘care’. Mrs Leslie is handpicked as her tutor and the invitation from the Cabinet is carefully orchestrated. At the Valedictory Dinner when Lucy is eventually granted her chance to speak and she ignores the approved script, it is Mrs Grey she cannot look at. Yet, it is Mrs Grey who congratulates her and awards her what she believes is the highest compliment: that she has indeed become “a true Laurindan.” (p334) Now that Lucy really understands the implications of this, she can finally respect Mrs Grey. But perhaps it is because she can finally respect herself.

- 1. Find an image that you believe represents the external features of Mrs Grey. Now choose a symbol that represents her character or personality or values. Explain why this symbol is the most significant.**
- 2. At what point in the narrative do you realise the connection between Mrs Grey and the Cabinet?**
- 3. List the key moments that reveal Mrs Grey’s character. Which one of her reactions defines her the most accurately?**
- 4. What is the significance of Mrs Grey’s final compliment?**
- 5. Is Mrs Grey redeemed at the end of the text?**

Ms Vanderwerp

“She had a trembly voice, the sort an old woman who served Iced VoVos might have, but she wasn’t even that old.” (p43)

“You know before Martha – Ms Vanderwerp – left, she told me to keep a close eye on you. She said you were one to watch because you were full of promise.” (p301)

This incompetent teacher becomes the first target of these girls we come to know as the Cabinet. The very first lesson in her class teaches Lucy that “mistakes meant annihilation”. (p46) Ms Vanderwerp just wants to do her job and teach history, but these girls have decided that she doesn’t meet their expectations. They are set to take her down, and it takes one hell of a prank to do it. Unbeknownst to Amber, Brodie and Chelsea, the reason Ms Vanderwerp is so petrified of germs is that her father is dying and any germ he is exposed to threatens his health even further. But to the Cabinet it is just another sign of weakness. Ms Vanderwerp becomes another pawn in their game. They treat her like a puppet that can be manipulated to suit themselves. When she doesn’t play the role they intend and awards a B+ for the assignment they stole from Katie, they set out to bring her down. The malicious cruelty of their tampon prank is indicative of the lengths these girls will go to in order to win. When Ms Vanderwerp goes on stress leave, their mission is accomplished. But as Lucy tearfully listens to Ms Vanderwerp’s explanation of what happened to her, it seems that her early departure allowed her precious time with her dying father. She doesn’t miss Laurinda, she is grateful for the escape. Especially as she realises that she did teach a lesson that was meaningful and lifelong, Lucy’s final speech is testament to that.

1. What is significant about the fact she always calls Lucy Linh?
2. Find five quotes that describe the character of Ms Vanderwerp in the classroom. Now compare these with the information she shares with Linh at the shopping centre. How does this explain some of her unusual behaviour?
3. What makes the Cabinet turn on her?
4. What is particularly malicious about this final prank?
5. How does Lucy respond to this incident? What does she lose as a result of this?
6. How does Lucy refer to Ms Vanderwerp in her final speech?

Language and Symbolism

IMAGERY AND DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE:

Alice Pung’s brilliance with language enables her to capture a moment or an image vividly and with sublime accuracy. She often uses humour to paint a picture of a character or emotion and succumb to clichés or generalisations. It makes her writing relatable, engaging

and highly original. She uses a range of similes and metaphors and often infuses uncomfortable situations with a shot of humour to put her readers in the minds of her characters. The following are some examples of this language.

Have students create three lists with as many examples as they can of these three techniques; similes, metaphors and humour. When it comes to their creative responses, these lists provide a model of Pung's writing that they can draw on for their own writing pieces.

"Tully, who had more A's than a wholesale box full of batteries." (p11)

"Yet her fingertips could read that piece of polyester fibre like a blind person read Braille." (p12)

"Mum had sewn him an orange polar-fleece tracksuit, complete with hood. He looked like a miniature pimp in the making." (p14)

"Mrs Grey had short hair dyed the colour of rust, and wore a wasabi-coloured blouse." (p21)

"The room was soon reeking with the odourless stench of collective contempt." (p45)

"When Mrs Grey noticed that Gina's face had the flat brown colour and texture of an unsliced supermarket bread loaf." (p61)

"Around their necks were rose-gold chains as thick as fingers, and silky scarves that smelled of perfume." (p165)

"Her laugh sounded like a machine gun, and her braces glinted like a steel trap." (p198)

SYMBOLS:

The use of symbolism in this text is at times shocking and other times subtle. Students will have no trouble identifying the symbolism present in the tampon, the photo or the blazer worn by the girls of Laurinda. These symbols are overt and used effectively to represent power and the way it can corrupt. Notions of class are also represented symbolically through the newspaper floor covering at Lucy's house or the organza bags filled with sweets at Amber's party. Other symbols are more subtle and require more observation and thought. The use of *The Great Gatsby* as a text Lucy studies with Mrs Leslie explores notions of privilege, class, envy and greed. Likewise culture is commented on with the enormous bunch of 'Australian' flowers and the plastic platters of rice paper rolls. The way the Cabinet maliciously wield their power is symbolised in the broken hand of Nadia Pinto. Compassion is represented by the life-saving Ventolin the neighbour offers Lamb when he has an asthma attack.

Concept Map:

Students can create a concept map only using symbols to convey meaning. Use the headings Character, Setting, Theme, Key Events and list the relevant examples under each heading. Students then choose a visual representation that they believe best summarises each

example. This enables them to focus their understanding of each element of the text into a key idea. From this map, students then design an alternative cover for the text by selecting one of the symbols. Consider why the tartan quilt of Laurinda has been chosen as the cover and what Pung was trying to represent in this choice. Write an explanation of why their symbol would make an appropriate cover for this novel.

Themes

Power

“That was when I learned a very important early lesson: here at Laurinda, mistakes meant annihilation.” (p46)

“It seemed that the Cabinet had always existed, although its members constantly changed, morphing into new faces every few years.” (p57)

“Do you want to know why Mrs Grey loves the Cabinet? Because they maintain the Laurinda myth. They keep the dissenters in line. Sometimes they even cull the weak. A little accident here or there, and a troublesome girl or teacher is out ... They steal and they maim.” (p304)

In adolescence popularity breeds power. But in most cases it is this power that poisons, corrupts and corrodes the very society it is trying to lead. At Laurinda this is absolutely the case. Is it because the power is held not by the administration or the educators, but by the girls who were destined to hold it? After all, these girls are almost born into the Cabinet. Their mothers were all members of the Cabinet at Laurinda many years ago and the same pattern of mistreatment and humiliation was established long ago. Mrs Grey knows this is one of the traditions of Laurinda that has stood the test of time. She doesn't rail against the injustice of this, but succumbs. In supporting the way these girls operate, the weak, vulnerable and different are excluded, tormented and evicted. Money holds enormous power, and these girls come from money. Their sense of privilege rots away any moral compass they may possess. They decide who must go and they decide the means to make it happen.

Ms Vanderwerp is perceived as incompetent and so Amber, Brodie and Chelsea set out to instigate her demise by targeting her vulnerabilities. Planting what appears to be a used tampon above the door so she walks straight into it is cruelty personified. Most people would be completely horrified and humiliated by this experience, but when your paranoia about germs and sickness is heightened, this becomes something she cannot recover from. Their treatment of Gina and the pen, Nicola and the exam questions, and any of the boys they perceive as ethnic also reeks of superiority. They manipulate and torment. And then they become violent. The decision to try and break Trisha's hand stems from pure jealousy. Her piano playing in no way impacts on their learning, reputation or perceived power. But

when they decide her popularity has overstepped the acceptable level, they kick the door in, intending to injure her. Again, their false apology and insistence on innocence is accepted without question and poor Nadia actually feels grateful for a moment that the Cabinet have included her.

Lucy has seen enough. She now knows their behaviour is generational and the school community's acceptance of this so ingrained that the Cabinet are untouchable. When she hurls obscenities at the girls and they don't respond or laugh, and Brodie's visit to her house doesn't see Lucy come back begging to be a part of their group once again, a crack in their armour appears. Finally, Lucy has given everyone else who tolerates these pranks a reason to resist. They don't have to remain silent, or even nod in approval; these students can now openly challenge their power. Without the fear and admiration of their student body, the Cabinet's power diminishes. The glory has gone and all that is left is room for someone to assume the role of leader.

Family and Culture

"I thought only Asian mothers did this kind of thing." (p133)

"Like my father, I had believed that educated people were gentler and kinder than the uncouth and unlearned masses – but now I wasn't so sure." (p174)

"She can't afford to lose them because their mothers run the Alumnae Association and make massive donations." (p304)

This is a novel of contrast, of different versions of Australian society. It shows the clash and disparity between those who come from a privileged middle-class, perhaps even upper-class background, and those who struggle to make ends meet as blue-collar workers and unskilled labourers. It makes comments about the perception that education can bridge the gap and allow those who come from a low socio-economic background to cross the border into the world of professional careers and cars with heated leather seats. Mrs Leslie and her friends epitomise the white, wealthy, patronising perspective that many have toward those of another class or culture. This assumption that the way they behave has more class and poise than those who have a different background to them is very much challenged in the experience Lucy has. She comes from a family who work hard, respect each other and strive for a better life. Her mother has no time for frivolous lunches with friends who gossip about the vicious and juvenile pranks they played on their peers at school. Quyen is too busy supporting her family. She didn't have the luxury of any education, let alone one that allowed a group of girls to bully and torment someone they believed was inferior to them. There is no doubt Lucy's English skills improve at the hands of Mrs Leslie. She learns to develop and articulate her ideas, to offer insight and judgement and this is shown in her writing and her ability to self-reflect. But there are many other lessons she learns about life, or about the kind of life someone at Laurinda might live. The relationship between Mrs Leslie and her daughter Amber is strained and distant. It isn't as though Lucy and her mum

embrace in tearful delight at the news of her scholarship, but the honest advice she offers her daughter as she struggles to make sense of this hierarchy of female maliciousness is poignant and meaningful. What the Lams lack in possessions, they make up for in genuine human relationships and integrity.

Pung also punctuates her novel with the casual racism that still permeates much of contemporary Australian society. Brodie's assumption that Lucy's family is engaged in illegal activity and the patronising comments Brodie, Amber and Chelsea make to Harshan based on the colour of his skin are examples of this undercurrent. The way girls assume that Lucy would only be interested in Asian boys further exemplifies the sense of difference that she is accorded. And her frustrated, tired response to the repeated question of where do you come from is met with the sarcasm and impatience it deserves. Whether it is based on class, post code, race or ethnicity, *Laurinda* demonstrates that there are many misconceptions people make based on the appearance of someone else.

Self-belief and Integrity

"And here was the bitter paradox of adolescence: alone, I was most myself, most true. But the self that really mattered was the self that was visible, the self that could be shown to other people. And here was Katie, proposing something radical: that she would support whichever self I needed out in the world." (p305)

Pung takes on a fairly typical adolescent journey in her text *Laurinda*. It features a young girl who doesn't follow the crowd, who resists the established pattern of treating teachers with contempt and peers with derision. Lucy is looking for change. She spends her final term at Christ Our Saviour dreaming of her new life in a fancy uniform at the prestigious school that gives her a free ride out of Stanley. What she encounters is much more challenging than the transformation she was expecting. Sure, the academic demands were higher, the girls' behaviour different, the setting reeking of tradition and history. But it is the abuse of power that is unexpected. At first Lucy is appalled and tries to garner support. When this is rejected, she simply tries to exist, but as the Cabinet suck her into their world and she becomes privy to the extensive history of the manipulation that has occurred, she retreats. In her own mind she tells herself she doesn't need this life, that her little brother needs her more, that her family won't understand if she tells them how bad it is. But as her mother indicates, life isn't always easy and you have to make a decision about how you will react. Lucy's chance encounter with Ms Vanderwerp is proof that even those burnt by the Cabinet survive and Katie's plea to stand tall and prove the Cabinet wrong inspires her to follow her true self. She might be most herself when she is alone, but "the self that really mattered was the self that was visible." (p305) With the endorsement of Mr Sinclair and the permission of Mrs Grey, Lucy speaks. She challenges what they have all come to accept as leadership, and presents an improved version of what it means to be Laurindan.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

EXPERTS:

Divide students into groups. Ask them to write a single sentence blurb for this text that captures the essence and one of the key themes of the text. Share the sentences to ensure there is variation within the class. Have each group make a book trailer using an ICT program using their sentence as the inspiration. They need to advertise this book by focusing on the theme they have chosen. By choosing key quotes, key scenes and characters that are relevant to their particular theme, students create a two-minute book trailer promoting the features of this text. For example: if their theme is popularity the students could film the description of the Cabinet moving through the yard with their hands in their blazer pockets and perhaps one of the pranks they pull. The quote: "It occurred to me then that I didn't like the Cabinet very much, but for some reason I wanted them to like me", as spoken by Lucy, might feature in the clip. Each book trailer is shown to the class to consider the different thematic considerations of this text.

QUOTE BINGO:

Give each student a bingo card with the characters listed in squares. (You could also do this activity with the themes.) Read out the quotes selected below and as students listen to each quote they write the corresponding number of the quote into the box of the character they think it relates to. Once a line has been completed they call out bingo and then have to explain each of the choices. This exercise is excellent for revision and developing a comprehensive list of key quotes to use in analytical essays.

"Because each one of her features was individually so striking, it took me a moment to realise that her face as a whole was stammeringly beautiful, a rare combination of beauty, innocence and experience that provoked asthmatic lust in boys and mute envy in girls." (p44)
Amber

"But besides cook and clean, what else can I do? I can't help you with your schoolwork. I can't speak to any of Lamb's teachers. I can't hang around the other parents at school."
(p276) Mum

"It was as if I had been drowsy at the wheel of a car, until a last-minute swerve from the road got my nerves and limbs working again, jump-starting my heart." (p277) Lucy

"Your silence gives others the impressions that you're ashamed of yelling at the Cabinet."
(p303) Katie

"An insecure person here is like a loose nut ... You just have to screw them up properly."
(p198) Chelsea

"Well, Lucy, what happened to me with those girls was a blessing in disguise." (p287) Ms Vanderwerp

"All year I've been scared of not being good enough, smart enough, of not being 'leadership material'". (p330) Lucy

"She was the sort of girl who wanted a boyfriend so badly that she gravitated toward whichever group happened to be discussing their crushes or their boy troubles." (p55) Gina

"She was the prefect who had marched into the auditorium bearing the school banner."
(p54) Brodie

"I thought of all those afternoons when she couldn't hang out or even do homework with us because she was being whisked away to some tutoring program or other." (p9) Tully

"I didn't know whether the other teachers took him seriously, or whether they mocked his Socratic classroom." (p302) Mr Sinclair

"There was a heartbreaking innocence about the way he believed these girls had taken his daughter under their wing." (p151) Dad

"Her naivety was a beautiful thing, I decided, because it meant she would always see the best in us." (p133) Mrs Leslie

"And only she appreciated how far I had truly come." (p334) Mrs Grey

"Well, hello, Miss Salmon Ella". (p326) Richard

MRS GREY	LUCY	AMBER	KATIE
MR SINCLAIR	MRS LESLIE	TULLY	LUCY
GINA	MR LAM	LUCY	MRS LAM
MS VANDERWERP	CHELSEA	BRODIE	RICHARD

NINE CARD SENTENCES:

The following table is printed, cut into squares and placed into an envelope. Students work in pairs to set out the table in three rows of three. The words may appear in any order on their desk. Students then write eight sentences based on the key words in each of the nine squares. Three sentences use the horizontal words, three use the vertical words and the last

two are the diagonal lines. The key words must all feature in the sentence, make sense and show an understanding of the text. They may appear in any order in that sentence.

MRS GREY	INTEGRITY	LAURINDA COLLEGE
THE CABINET	LUCY	THE TAMPON PRANK
POWER	MRS LESLIE	STANLEY

Assessment

ANALYTICAL RESPONSES:

1. "It occurred to me then that even though I didn't like the Cabinet very much, for some reason I wanted them to like me."
Laurinda demonstrates how the appeal of popularity causes adolescent girls to behave abhorrently and often completely out of character. Discuss.
2. This text is one long letter to a girl called Linh. What lessons does Lucy learn through explaining herself to Linh and finally saying goodbye?
3. "I am grateful that I carry a little piece of Stanley with me wherever I go, wherever I end up."
Laurinda demonstrates that we are forever a product of our origin. To what extent is this true for the characters in this novel?

4. Education and money do not always equal class. Discuss with references to the characters in *Laurinda*.
5. “To be a true leader, I think you must first learn what it is like to follow.”
How does Alice Pung explore what it means to remain true to oneself and maintain integrity?

CREATIVE RESPONSES:

1. Take on the persona of one of the girls in Mr Sinclair’s class. Write an essay on the topic ‘Power always corrupts’. Write the essay this particular student would write based on their own perspective.
2. Create a visual representation of how Lucy/Linh sees herself at the beginning of the text and then another how she sees herself at the end of the text. Feature the idea of the dual personality of Lucy and Linh.
3. Provide your own written responses in argumentative, expository or imaginative style to the image included in the back of the text. It is not for a scholarship entrance exam, just your own written response to this image.
4. Write an extra scene for the novel that features another prank the Cabinet pull on a teacher or students. Try and mimic the writing style of Alice Pung and also the language and mannerisms of the characters present in the scene.
5. Lucy’s mother is typical of many Asian mothers who give little verbal support or encouragement to their children, but are the first to sing their praises to anyone who will listen. Write the conversation Quyen has with Tully’s mum about the year Lucy has had at Laurinda College. (Imagine it has been translated, don’t write in broken English.)
6. Write the letter a 35-year-old Lucy writes back to her 15-year-old self on the eve of the eighteen year reunion of Laurinda girls. What advice would she give herself?

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*.

www.alicepung.com

When my dad dropped us off at the front gate, the first things I saw were the rose garden spreading out on either side of the main driveway and the enormous sign in iron cursive letters spelling out LAURINDA. No “Ladies College” after it, of course; the name was meant to speak for itself.

Laurinda is an exclusive school for girls. At its secret core is the Cabinet, a trio of girls who wield power over their classmates – and over some of their teachers.

Entering this world of wealth and secrets is Lucy Lam, a scholarship girl with sharp eyes and a shaky sense of self. As she watches the Cabinet at work, and is courted by them, Lucy finds herself in a battle for her identity and integrity.

Funny, feisty and moving, *Laurinda* brilliantly explores Lucy’s struggle to stay true to herself as she finds her way in a new world of privilege and opportunity.

Recommended for middle and senior secondary

Subject: Fiction

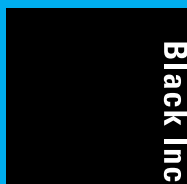
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www.blackincbooks.com/teachers

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For all other enquiries, please contact Black Inc.
37–39 Langridge St, Collingwood, Victoria 3066
Phone: +61 3 9486 0288 Fax +61 3 9486 0244
Email: enquiries@blackincbooks.com