

However, Sue Ryan has blended in her personal views which open up new vistas and bring a refreshing new light on the Carey novels. The occasional typo mars the text (quite annoying when it comes to misspelling Frank Moorhouse's name on page 11) while other mistakes are a mere giveaway that Sue Ryan expresses herself in her second language — a remarkable feat which begs for benevolent leniency.

CA Cranston stated in *JASAL* 7 (2007) that her "understanding is that European PhD candidates publish their theses as a matter of course..." I'm afraid this brash assertion is nothing like as accurate as she thought. Hats off to Sue Ryan for being part of the very happy few France-based Australianists who managed to develop their rewarding doctoral dissertation into a published critical work which is commendably well-researched. For all its strengths and faults, *Peter Carey et la quête postcoloniale d'une identité australienne* might well become a textbook in the near future (the same could be said for other monographs on prominent Australian writers) should the academic decision-makers be tempted to put Australian postcolonial writers down on the curriculum for the CAPES and Agrégation, two competitive examinations in France, both equivalents of the Diploma of Education. There was a fair attempt at one stage with Patrick White and since then Australian writers have been left marooned "at the far side

of the world." Sue Ryan has to be credited with allowing Peter Carey to take centre-stage.



*Tony Simoes da Silva*

## ALICE, THE WORD-SPREADER

Alice Pung. *Unpolished Gem*. Melbourne: Black Inc, 2006. ISBN 9781863951586. RRP: \$24.95. pp.282.

Alice Pung begins *Unpolished Gem* (2006) by noting that "[t]his story does not begin on a boat" (1), a somewhat whimsical yet intensely political allusion to the period in which the book appeared. A story of refugees arrived in Australia long before former Prime Minister John Howard came to power, *Unpolished Gem* is the kind of book he may have contrived to stop from publication since boats and refugees loomed so large in his phantasmagoria. Yet, that Pung's memoir should open "in a suburb in Melbourne, in Australia, in a market swarming with fat pigs and thin people" (1) seems almost as ironic, for this is an uncannily un-Australian world these days. If the experts are correct, healthily thin people are in danger of extinction in contemporary Australia, but perhaps

their demise signifies to the refugee familiar with the hunger and despair of slow boat journeys to Australia a vocabulary of hope and joyful excess. Commenting on the challenges overcome by these new arrivals, she writes: "Every journey is one small step for Australians, but one giant leap for the wah-sers." (10).

In *Unpolished Gem* these wah-sers are the people walking round Melbourne dressed in cast-offs from charity op-shops, "draped," as Pung notes with characteristic humour, "in their De Paul finery, exclusive new arrivals from the St. Vincent line," "wahing" in wonder, perplexity or fear as they learn the ways of their new home. Through her story and that of her parents Pung writes of an emerging hybrid consciousness, a product of a Cambodian mind set and an Australian context that exists as a web of diverse and complex influences. A personal story, the memoir bears witness to an Australia undergoing the natural processes of change, transformation, and reinvigoration produced by successive waves of migration. As Pung writes, early in the book:

This is the suburb where words like *and*, *at* and *of* are redundant, where full sentences are not necessary. "Two kilo dis. Give me seven dat." If you were to ask politely, "Would you please be so kind as to give me a half-kilo of the Lady Fingers?" the shop-owner might not understand you. "You wanna dis one? Dis banana? How many you want hah?" (2)

Pung's unique ear for the poetics of everyday life is evident here, drawing on an ability to be at once an insider to, and an interpreter of, her family's cultural ways, a young Asian woman growing Australian by degrees, first at school and later at "Mao Bin U.," her mother's quaint translation of "Melbourne University." In the hands of a less accomplished writer this attention to the quirky detail of the migrant's recalcitrant diction might so easily have turned into cynical caricature, disconnected from the people of whom the writer is a part. Pung knows, however, that "[n]o one exists in isolation of their families" and to mock the other is ultimately to poke fun at oneself. It is a cliché, dated, limp, overused, but as Pung's memoir shows time and again the relational self is alive and well in the Asian-Australian family, perhaps more widely in the hyphenated mobs at large as well.

Stereotypes abound in this story of growing Asian in Australia, but they are endearingly depicted, fleshed out, let free to mean anew time and again. The stereotype of the pushy and ambitious Asian parent, for example, is truly brought to life but Pung plays it safe, knowingly the insider-outsider. Encouraged by her mother in particular to excel at everything she does, such success is as much for the benefit of mainstream "white ghost" Australia as it is to impress fellow wah-sers from Cambodia, Vietnam, or China. Pung's own parents will eventually do so well in life that they will own not one but two stores selling

electrical appliances, because as her father puts it, "Every Lee and Lah is opening bloody grocery stores" and he wants to be different. Different, yet similar; for as Pung writes, her father's achievements speak of his embracing what he perceives as (white) Australia's "franchise way of live" and the dream of self-employment.

His is a narrative familiar to migrants the world over trying to escape the trap of poor or unrecognised qualifications, rudimentary language skills and the desire to prove oneself worthy of acceptance in the brave new world they now inhabit. Just as often it is a narrative that the immigrant does not wish for her children; for the social theorist, migration is about holding on to tried and tested methods, to cultural values and traditions, but rarely is this so uncomplicated in the life of migrants. Few wish for their children the drudgery of endless hours at the corner shop, as taxi drivers or the endless dusk-to-dawn shifts cleaning offices, toilets, schools. Words like "at," "and" and "of" may not belong in the vocabulary of many migrants but "lawyers," "doctors" and "dentists" do, as Pung shows in the story of her own parents' ambitions for her. They dream of acceptance, of belonging, of being boringly like anyone else. Early in the book, she writes:

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. The plants we plant in the backyard are functional plants, herbs like hot Thai mint, shallots and lemongrass, and we have geraniums and oleander in the front yard. (20)

The irony, which the writer knows only too well, is that chicken- and goat-keeping are in fact all the rage among the *bien pensant* classes, ethically attuned, Planet loving, and in love with the acrid smell of animal shit that reminds them of their own realness. Pung's migrants are only too aware of the acrid smell of Pol Pot's death camps in Cambodia, of the rotting bodies in Vietnam's war fields or of the camps in which they lived brief transient existences in Hong Kong, Malaysia, or Thailand. They are happy in suburbia, the fantasy of kitsch so extreme that it might be equally at home in any museum of modern art. Reality too is something best consumed in moderation, for too often its raw immediacy evokes in the immigrant's mind a past she seeks to forget.

At 282 pages, it is hard to think of *Unpolished Gem* (2006) as the work of someone "running out of words" (142). Yet this is a narrative haunted by the loss of speech, the effacement of self, the translation into a strangely (un)familiar self. But when Pung speaks of running out of words she means Chinese words, the words that connect her to her mother and to her grandmother,

for she has long been a “word-spreader” trapped in the position of go-between, of mis/informer and informant. She is interpreter and interpreted, a translator translating herself into place, into time, into a self that is Asian *and* Australian, Asian-Australian. At one point a nervous breakdown leaves her nearly catatonic, a refugee in her own room, unable to communicate with self or other, but soon words, the English words of her Asian-Australian self, return to let her tell her story, in her voice.



*Jane Frugtniet*

## FLYING HIGH

Pat Skinner. *Brolga*. Canberra: Ginninderra Press, 2006. ISBN 1 74027 367 2. RRP: \$30.00. pp.396.

*Brolga* is Pat Skinner’s first published novel. A NSW-based poet and fiction writer, she has won several literary prizes, including the Ginninderra Press Short Story Competition in 2002 for “Blaming Eucalyptus.” Clearly, the Australian subject matter evident in her prize-winning short story is reflected in her novel, where place is inextricably linked with art, nature, and landscape. Divided into two acts with an interval and a *réverence*, the tale opens in

Melbourne, but judging from the title of the first act, “Queensland,” and its chapter heading, “Going North,” the location will soon shift. Indeed, the novel’s central theme is movement, as evidenced by its structure, and reflected by its narrative subject — dancing.

The protagonist, twenty-nine-year-old Jared Kahler, is a senior artist with the Australian Ballet. However he is disillusioned with his career, despite his close friendship with Sophie, his dancing partner. It would appear that success has not fulfilled this complex character and he consequently disappears, seemingly without trace, leaving behind a meagre paper trail. Motivated by a memory of Sydney Long’s *The Spirit of the Plains* that instilled disquiet and yearning in his teens, he aims to discover what drives him or, more accurately, what has led to his lack of drive — what lacks in his soul. Interestingly, his quest for self-discovery germinates in Brisbane at the Queensland Art Gallery where once again, almost twelve years later, he is confronted by *Spirit of the Plains*. However, this is an earlier version of Long’s painting, painted in Australia in 1897. This temporal shift symbolically represents Jared’s dislocation with reality, but at this juncture there is more connection with Australia, as evidenced by his description of the newer version of the painting which was painted in Europe: “I still say there’s something wrong with this painting. But I can’t put it into words. There’s a sort of primevalness about the landscape,