

# Room for a Stranger



Melanie Cheng

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## PRaise FOR ROOM FOR A STRANGER

'Melanie Cheng is an astonishingly deft and incisive writer.'

CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS

'My god, this was a joy to read.'

BENJAMIN LAW

'A tender and moving book and one that is ultimately life-affirming and full of hope and kindness.'

SATURDAY PAPER

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## ABOUT MELANIE CHENG

Melanie Cheng is a writer and general practitioner. She was born in Adelaide, grew up in Hong Kong and now lives in Melbourne.

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## A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO ROOM FOR A STRANGER

In an era when society seems more divided than ever, Melanie Cheng's debut novel, *Room for a Stranger*, tells a timely, tender story of cross-cultural connection. It opens in the aftermath of a break-in: shaken by the incident, Meg—a white Australian pensioner living with her African grey parrot in Melbourne's suburbs—is considering a homeshare arrangement with Andy, a twenty-one-year-old student from Hong Kong. Meg is to provide room and board in exchange for ten hours of housework each week—and for the reassurance of having another person around the house.

At their first meeting, Andy arrives at Meg's house, ready to move in—the first of many small misunderstandings that arise between the two. Gradually, Andy and Meg attempt to navigate their differences in age, background and worldview, and they begin a tentative friendship.

But their shared existence is undermined by Andy's secret struggle: he's failing his biomedicine course and can't tell his family.

*Room for a Stranger* is the follow-up to Cheng's award-winning story collection, *Australia Day*, which was lauded for its subtle evocation of everyday life. That empathy and eye for detail are at work in this novel, too: not only in the two protagonists but also in their friends and family, who round out this story. There's Andy's straight-talking aunt Winnie, married to an Australian man and living in Geelong; Meg's friend Jillian, who's known her for seventy years; and, of course, Atticus, Meg's irrepressible parrot.

Ultimately, Cheng reminds us that there are greater barriers between people than cultural differences: silence can make us strangers to those who should be closest to us.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. On page 5, Meg mentions how important first impressions are to her. What did you think of her first meeting with Andy, and her eventual assessment that the homeshare arrangement was going to be a 'win-win situation'?
2. Andy reflects on his suspicious nature early on (pp. 22–23, 'He found most things in biomedicine a little hard to fathom...It all felt more like magic.'). How else does this quality come through in the novel, and what causes Andy to put his guard up?
3. Early on, Meg wonders if Jillian is friends with her out of pity, and whether Jillian decides to reconnect with Anne out of boredom (p. 27). Do you agree with this assessment? How would you characterise the two women's friendship?

4. 'Nobody valued silence anymore—if anything, they seemed unnerved by it.' (p. 39) In what other ways has the world changed since Meg was a child? How does this contribute to her sense of isolation?
5. Compare the racist incident on the tram (p. 81) with Patrick's comments about Hong Kong (p. 114). What would you have done in those scenarios?
6. What did you think of Patrick? Reflecting again on the importance Meg places on first impressions, do you think there were warning signs when she met Patrick (pp. 70–71)?
7. 'At worst he felt like a burden; at best, a nuisance.' (p. 120) How does this thinking affect Andy's actions? How can we better instil a sense of self-worth in children? You may also want to reflect on Andy's father's comment about Winnie: 'She's not firm enough with [her children]. She loves them too much.' (p. 248)
8. How do Winnie and Andy differ in their experiences of moving to Australia? What leads to those differences? Reflect on the revelation towards the end about Winnie's marriage, and what significance that has for Andy.
9. Helen's accident has had an enormous impact on Meg. What do you think Meg's life would have been like if it hadn't happened? Do you agree with Jill's remark that Meg was just 'scared of making a life for [herself]' (p. 124)?
10. 'In Meg's opinion animals were more like humans than humans gave them credit for.' (p. 195) Would you agree with Meg? How is this shown through the author's depiction of Atticus?
11. At Anne's funeral, Meg longs to warn Greg about the true nature of grief, but stays in her chair (p. 68). Towards the end of the novel, she says she wishes she'd had more 'proper conversations', rather than 'talking without really saying anything'. Why are people so reluctant to talk about serious subjects? What can we do to encourage deeper conversation?
12. How does the novel play with the idea of stereotypes? In what ways do Meg and Andy act differently from what society expects of them?
13. How did your feelings towards Andy and Meg change over the course of the novel, particularly as they revealed different perspectives on the same event?
14. What do you ultimately think of the homeshare program? How else can we help people like Andy and Meg—international students and the elderly—feel part of the broader community?
15. Do you think people tend to live in a 'bubble', in which they are surrounded by people who are similar to them? How can we reach out to those who have different backgrounds and worldviews?