

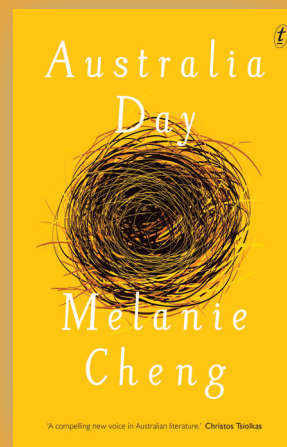
# Australia Day



Melanie Cheng

ISBN 9781925498592  
FICTION, TRADE PAPERBACK

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## PRAISE FOR AUSTRALIA DAY

Winner of the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript, 2016

'Melanie Cheng is an astonishingly deft and incisive writer. With economy and elegance, she creates a dazzling mosaic of contemporary life, of how we live now. Hers is a compelling new voice in Australian literature.'  
CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS

'What a wonderful book, a book with bite. These stories have a real edge to them. They are complex without being contrived, humanising, but never sentimental or cloying—and, ultimately, very moving.'  
ALICE PUNG

'In each story, Melanie Cheng creates an entire microcosm, peeling back the superficial to expose the raw nerves of contemporary Australian society. Her eye is sharp and sympathetic, her characters flawed and funny and utterly believable.'  
JENNIFER DOWN

'Melanie Cheng's stories are a deep dive into the diversity of humanity. They lead you into lives, into hearts, into unexplored places, and bring you back transformed.'  
MICHELLE WRIGHT

'The characters stay in the mind, their lives and experiences mirroring many of our own, challenging us to think how we might respond in their place. An insightful, sometimes uncomfortable portrayal of multicultural Australia from an observant and talented writer.'  
RANJANA SRIVASTAVA

'Cheng's scientific training shows in her keen and dispassionate character observation. These no-fuss tales display a variety of people attending to their lives each wrapped snugly in their own skins and in their own heads but each curiously identifiable as Australian.'  
SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

'If only the PM might pick up a copy, even by mistake.'  
SATURDAY PAPER

'The author's empathetic eye and easy facility with dialogue make the anthology a strong debut.'  
*BIG ISSUE*

'A bittersweet, beautifully crafted collection.'  
*BOOKS+PUBLISHING*

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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. In 2016 she won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript. *Australia Day* is her first book.

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## A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO AUSTRALIA DAY

Melanie Cheng has populated these beautifully written stories with a rich variety of characters, all with vivid inner lives, conflicting emotions and intangible motivations. She skilfully draws their worlds, their families and their relationships. Most of all, she depicts the different ways in which her characters are wrestling with identity or their sense of belonging.

The collection is bookended by two stories set on 26 January. In the first, 'Australia Day', Stanley—a university student from Hong Kong who has just passed his Australian citizenship test—visits rural Victoria to meet his love interest's oh-so-white family. In the last, 'A Good and Pleasant Thing', an elderly woman, Mrs Chan, has lunch with her family, a mix of three generations from Chinese and Australian backgrounds. Both stories touch on themes that recur throughout the book: love, family, identity and belonging, culture, race and privilege in multicultural Australia.

In these two (and other) stories, Cheng explores what it means to be Australian, but refuses to provide easy answers, asking what motivates us to claim one identity over another, and how we struggle to negotiate

those claims. Some of the stories are overt in their engagement with these themes, while others consider broader questions of inclusion and exclusion—but all prompt the reader to think about these characters and their worlds, the choices available to them and the different meanings their actions might have. Together, these stories do more than any one of them could alone, inviting us to think about who we are not just as individuals, but as a society.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Cheng's epigraph is a line from Malcolm Turnbull's first speech as prime minister: 'There has never been a more exciting time to be an Australian.' Why do you think she chose it, and what does it mean?
2. Does this collection of stories paint a picture of Australia that a novel might not be able to? If so, how? Is it an Australia you recognise? Are the Australians portrayed in Cheng's stories different to the characters in other Australian stories you've read?
3. How does the title story, the first in the collection, influence your reading of the others? Did you read the others expecting the same themes? Why do you think Cheng chose to start with that story and not another?
4. Just after we've met the Cook family in 'Australia Day', we get a glimpse of the Kelly family in 'Big Problems'. Both families are Australian, but how is the Cooks' Australia different to the Australia the Kellys live in? Why does Leila—a Londoner with Syrian heritage—describe the Kellys' life in Melbourne as 'obscene'? (pp. 25)
5. In 'Clear Blue Seas', Kat escapes the luxurious confines of the resort where she and Raf are on their honeymoon to see where the locals live. She is caught by a staff member from the resort, who tells her firmly: 'You don't belong here.' (pp. 59) Why is Kat so unhappy at the resort? What does she hope to find by going exploring? Why doesn't Raf feel the same?
6. In 'Hotel Cambodia', a friend asks Melissa: 'What's with you white people going to third world countries and making yourselves uncomfortable?' Although Melissa has Asian heritage, she recognises 'she had lived a privileged existence compared to him'. (pp. 70) Why does her friend see her as 'white' in this particular situation? Is Melissa right to doubt her own motivations? Why do people from wealthy countries choose to travel or work in poor countries? Is the desire to do good ever entirely altruistic?
7. Cheng is a general practitioner, with firsthand experience of the sometimes difficult relationship between doctors and patients. 'Macca' explores the relationship between a young doctor and a patient who cares less about his treatment than she does. How different would this story be if it were told from the patient's point of view rather than the doctor's? Would Dr Garrett's job have been easier if she cared less? Was her older colleague's advice cynical or just pragmatic?
8. How does the doctor–patient dynamic in 'Macca' differ from that in 'Fracture'? Who is the victim in 'Fracture', and who is to blame for what happens? At what point does this story's conclusion become inevitable?
9. Grief is another theme running throughout this collection of stories. Some characters are mourning a recent loss; others are dealing with its long-term effects. Which of Cheng's characters' stories are most powerfully shaped by grief, and what is it that they have lost?
10. In 'Ticket-holder Number 5', Tania believes a client's sob-story and bends the rules for her. Tania has never given in before, so why do you think she gives in now? And why does she react so violently to being tricked?
11. In 'Things That Grow', we learn that Cora and her husband Paul fought a lot, and she knew he had been unfaithful to her. How does that complicate her feelings when he is killed in an accident? At one point, curled beneath her doona, she says: 'It's not relief I feel at his absence, but it's not longing either.' What do you think it is she's feeling? Evan's grief in 'Muse' is similarly complicated, but he only learns that Lola cheated on him long after he was unfaithful himself. Is grief harder to bear when it is accompanied by guilt or regret?
12. 'Toy Town', 'Allomother' and 'White Sparrow' are tinged with a feeling that might be grief. What are the women in these stories mourning? And is grief the right word to describe what they are feeling? If not, what would you call it? Can you grieve for a place or a culture, a past or a lost future, as you would for someone you loved?
13. Do any of Cheng's characters find the sense of belonging they are searching for? If so, which characters? And how—or where—do they find it?
14. In 'A Good and Pleasant Thing', the Chans discuss the Australia Day holiday, and Daisy says: 'I wouldn't care if it was on a different day...or called a different thing...so long as we get a public holiday!' Were you expecting the stories in this book to comment more directly on the Australia Day holiday, and the ongoing controversy about its celebration? Is this collection more focused on the personal or the political?
15. How do the first and last stories—both set around Australia Day, and both featuring Hong Kong Chinese characters—compare? Which is more optimistic? Does the final story answer any of the questions that are raised in the first (and other) stories?