

Australia Day

MELANIE CHENG

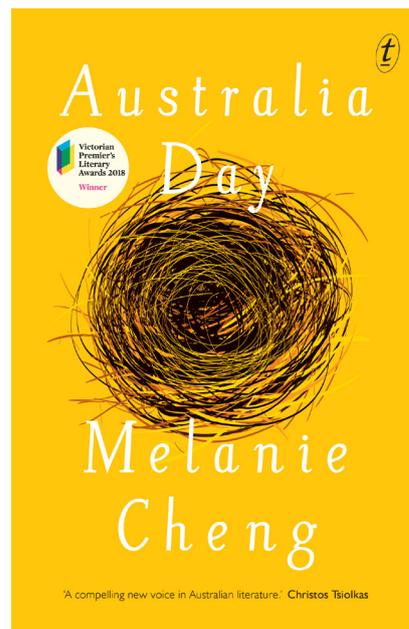
ISBN 9781925603972

RRP AU\$22.99

Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 16+

Sign up to Text's once-a-term education newsletter for prizes, free reading copies and teaching notes textpublishing.com.au/education



CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning and connect it to an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Australia Day is an award-winning collection of fourteen short stories by Australian author Melanie Cheng. Each story explores aspects of the human condition, examining the flaws, failings and vulnerabilities of its characters as well as their grit and strength as they struggle with everyday challenges we can all recognise and relate to—like trying to fit in, make friends, find love or cope with loss.

The stories invite the reader into the lives of a diverse array of contemporary characters. Most are living and working in Australia; others are Australians travelling or working overseas. We meet newlyweds and grieving widows, single and surrogate parents, elderly grandparents, only children and bickering siblings, students and social workers and hospital patients.

Australia Day has much to offer senior English and Literature students working at different levels and from different backgrounds, asking them to consider what it means to belong, and the difficulties many of us face in seeking connection. The stories encourage a nuanced understanding of the diversity of experience and identity in Australia, many of them also affirming the capacity of the human spirit to find a way forward in times of adversity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Cheng is a writer and general practitioner. Of Chinese-Australian heritage, she was born in Adelaide, grew up in Hong Kong and now lives in Melbourne with her family. Her debut short-story collection, *Australia Day*, won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript in 2016 and the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for fiction in 2018. Her writing has been published in the *Age*, *Big Issue*, *Meanjin* and *Overland* among other publications. Her first novel, *Room for a Stranger*, will be published in May 2019.

BEFORE READING

1. Write a paragraph summarising what you know about the Australia Day holiday and its purpose, place and popularity in Australian society.
2. Define the term *epigraph* and explain the role an epigraph plays in a text. Find *Australia Day's* epigraph and write it down. List the ideas you think the epigraph is intended to communicate. As a class, discuss why Cheng chose this epigraph.
3. In pairs, discuss the significance of the collection's title. What do you think the title suggests the stories will explore? List your predictions and then compare them with another pair's ideas.

WHILE READING

1. *Australia Day* is a collection of short stories. Research the characteristics of the short-story form. In a table, compare and contrast the novel and short-story forms, focusing on length, narrative structure, setting and characters.
2. Create a table that compares *Australia Day's* fourteen stories. Include the following column headings: length, narrative structure, narrative point of view, setting (time, place, season), characters, plot, ideas and themes.



3. When you have completed your table, compare the stories' similarities and differences. What patterns emerge? Does Cheng focus on particular settings or types of characters? What kinds of relationships is she concerned with? Do any ideas and themes recur? List your findings.
4. In a short-story collection, individual stories are often linked in some way. In groups of four, create a visual diagram identifying the links between the stories in *Australia Day*. Consider what they have in common. For example: ideas and themes, character types/relationships, setting, narrative voice, imagery, style, emotions.
5. The collection begins and ends with stories set on Australia Day: 'Australia Day' and 'A Good and Pleasant Thing'. Identify the protagonist of each of these stories. What makes Stanley and Mrs Chan different to a traditional protagonist in Australian fiction? Compare Stanley's background and experiences in Australia to Mrs Chan's. What problems do they both face? Are they able to solve these problems? Why or why not? What ideas and themes does Cheng underline by framing her collection with these two stories? What do you think motivates Cheng to give voice to characters like Stanley and Mrs Chan?
6. Like Stanley and Mrs Chan, Kat ('Clear Blue Seas') and Evan ('Muse') both experience feelings of isolation. Kat and Evan are very different to Stanley and Mrs Chan, though, and their personal circumstances are different too. Why does newlywed Kat feel so isolated on her honeymoon? What has led to Evan's feelings of isolation? Write two paragraphs exploring the different facets of isolation and loneliness experienced by Stanley, Mrs Chan, Kat and Evan, and another exploring how looking at the idea of isolation from different perspectives challenges our understanding of the epigraph.
7. Are these contemporary stories? Revisit your table from question 2. What conclusions can you draw? What broad portrait of Australia does Cheng seem to be painting? How does this compare to your view of Australia?
8. 'Big Problems' is told from Leila's point of view. She is an au pair with a Syrian background, born and raised in London. List the people she meets on her trip and their different perspectives on climbing Uluru. Note who chooses to climb and who doesn't, and the consequences for those who do climb. The story concludes with Leila feeling 'as if the entire world were vibrating'. What has caused this feeling? What is the connection she feels with her Syrian mother in this moment?
9. 'Fracture' is one of the longest stories in the collection. It explores the different perspectives of two migrants, Deepak and Tony, and how they see Tony's accident.

In pairs, prepare 'hot seat' questions for Tony and

Deepak to deepen the class's understanding of these characters and their relationship with each other. Take turns playing the role of Deepak or Tony. Choose one pair to perform their hot seat interview for the class.

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. Which character interested you the most? How did Cheng present this character, and how did this influence your view of them? Write a profile of this character, including the following details: name (is it significant?); appearance; values and world view (as revealed by what they say and do); history (what past events have influenced the character's development?); relationships; personal turning points; key settings in which the character appears (how do they feel in this setting?); and the character's fate (are they rewarded or punished in some way for their actions or the values they possess?).
2. Compare protagonists Dr Garrett ('Macca') and Tania ('Ticket-holder Number 5') to their foils, Macca and Ticket-holder Number 5. Who has the most power in these relationships? Does this change over the course of the stories? Write two paragraphs exploring your ideas and include supporting evidence from both stories.
3. *Australia Day* features several characters who are grieving. Cora ('Things That Grow') and Evan ('Muse') are grieving for spouses. Identify two other characters who are grieving. What have they lost? As a class, discuss the ideas and themes Cheng explores through these characters. Place each character on a happiness continuum. Who is the happiest? Who is the unhappiest? Why did you choose these two? Do you recognise any of Cheng's characters or their experiences in people you know?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. Cheng's style is best described as realism. Though her stories are fiction, they feel like they could really have happened. List the features of realistic fiction as a genre. In groups of three or four, read 'Toy Town', 'Hotel Cambodia' or 'Allomother'. At least two groups should read each story. Discuss how and why the chosen story could be described as realistic fiction and then summarise your conclusions in a brief paragraph. Support your opinions with evidence.
2. The narrative structures of Cheng's stories are carefully crafted. As a class, create graphs of the narrative structures of 'Fracture' and 'Muse', marking the key points in the story at which the tension rises and falls. Chart the level of dramatic tension on the vertical axis and the story's progress on the horizontal axis, starting with the problem or conflict, followed by the climax and resolution.



3. What makes Cheng's writing style distinctive? Annotate the opening pages of the first story, 'Australia Day' (pp. 1–9). Make note of Cheng's use of: descriptive language; specific detail; dialogue; third-person perspective; tone; dry humour; colloquialisms; anatomical terminology; italics; and short and long sentences. Write a paragraph describing how the portrayal of Neville Cook provides an early glimpse of Cheng's style. Support your argument with specific evidence.

THEMES

Fractured families

1. 'One of Tom's—Bec recognises it straight away. She's not sure how Ollie got his hands on it.' In 'White Sparrow', Bec is a single parent living with her son, Ollie. Cheng's characters live in many different types of families. In groups of four, create a mind map summarising the different types the reader encounters in each story. Indicate the nature of the relationships between the members of the family. Are they close or distant? Healthy and loving? Fractured or healing?
2. In 'Muse', Evan seems revitalised by the family he forms with Bea, Edwina and Sebastian, yet this new family is eventually revealed to be vulnerable and fragile. Create a time line of key events in Evan's family life, from his marriage to Lola to the impending departure of Edwina. Include details of any particular imagery Cheng associates with these turning points. When you have finished, write a paragraph discussing whether you think 'Muse' offers a hopeful or pessimistic view of family.
3. Compare Evan's situation to Mrs Chan's in 'A Good and Pleasant Thing'. Whose story offers the most hope? Create a time line summarising the key events which lead to Mrs Chan feeling connected to or disconnected from her family. Include examples of imagery that Cheng associates with these moments. Write two paragraphs contrasting Mrs Chan's experience of family with Evan's. As a class, discuss what these stories seem to be saying about family. What creates cohesive families?

Identity and loss

1. The sudden death of Cora's husband in 'Things That Grow' changes her sense of self. Read and annotate pp. 85–88. What do you notice about the narrative perspective? What insights does Cora have into her sense of self following Paul's death, particularly in relation to her mother? What other losses were turning points in her relationship with Paul, and how did these losses shape their shared identity? What imagery does Cheng use to suggest the awakening of a new identity for Cora?
2. In 'White Sparrow', Cheng uses a rare sparrow as a metaphor. What does it represent? Why is Ollie so drawn to the white sparrow? Why does Bec feel a kinship with the bird? Find evidence to support your opinions. Do you think Mr Walton is right that

'there's a white sparrow in everybody' (p. 170)? Re-read the story's end. Is it optimistic? What symbolism does Cheng use in her conclusion?

3. In 'Fracture', Tony's sense of self, like Cora's, is shaken. Draw a Venn diagram comparing Cora and Tony. How do the life-changing moments they experience affect their view of themselves? Whose story offers the greatest hope? Do you think their fates are fair or unfair? Do the characters' personal values influence your answers to these questions? Is Tony being punished for his values? Is Cora being rewarded for hers? Justify your response with close reference to the text.

Belonging

1. 'It was Maha's fourth winter in Melbourne, but it felt as cold and lonely as her first...Maha had thought she would feel settled by now, that she would have at least a couple of friends.' ('Toy Town'.) List the reasons for Maha's loneliness, and how it is reflected in the season and her feelings about her appearance. As a class, discuss the end of the story. Is it hopeful? How does Cheng use limited third-person perspective, dialogue and imagery to convey how Maha is feeling?
2. Like Maha in 'Toy Town', Stanley, Mrs Chan, Deepak, Leila and Melissa ('Hotel Cambodia') also feel like outsiders. Create a table showing the contexts in which each of these characters feels unsettled, disconnected from others or like an impostor or fraud. Provide evidence to support your opinions. What conclusions can you draw about the difficulties of belonging in a globalised world? Write three paragraphs summarising your conclusions.
3. 'After a brief moment of thought, Stanley opts for D.' In 'Australia Day', Stanley finds that trying to belong involves compromise. Read and annotate p. 12 to find evidence to support this view. Have you ever ignored or put up with others' rudeness or inappropriate behaviour just to fit in? If so, what were your reasons? How did your circumstances and response compare to Stanley's?

RESPONDING

1. Write an analytical text response to this question: Cheng's *Australia Day* is more about despair than hope. To what extent do you agree?
2. Write an extended analysis in response to one of the following questions: How do the stories in Cheng's *Australia Day* comment on the experiences and concerns of migrants? OR How do the stories in Cheng's *Australia Day* challenge Malcolm Turnbull's assertion that there has never been a more exciting time to be an Australian?
3. Many of the characters in Cheng's stories are relatively minor figures in the text. What perspectives could they bring to the stories they appear in? Write a creative text response exploring the perspective of one of these characters, such as

Simone from 'Fracture', Nicole from 'Toy Town' or Cora's mother from 'Things That Grow'.

4. There are many gaps in the stories that could be filled, including events that are referred to that we never see. There is also plenty of backstory that could be added to the text. Write a creative text response filling in one of these gaps. Here are some suggestions: Why was Tom from 'White Sparrow' sitting outside Ollie's school? When did things go wrong between Pandora and her daughter in 'Doughnuts'?
5. Interview a tourist or migrant about their experiences in Australia. Ask if they feel a sense of belonging here, and what impact this has had on their sense of self. Alternatively, interview an Australian who now lives in another country or someone who has travelled overseas. How has being an outsider influenced their identity? Present your findings to the class in a formal speech with visuals, using presentation software.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES

Jill Fitzsimons is the director of professional learning and partnerships at Marcellin College. Jill was previously curriculum leader at St Columba's College and English learning leader at Whitefriars College and has taught at Genazzano FCJ College, Loreto Mandeville Hall and Mackillop College, Swan Hill.

She has worked as a VCE English and GAT assessor and has presented workshops for VCE English teachers. Jill has also appeared on ABC Radio Melbourne's 'Sunday School' program for VCE students and has written a variety of study guides for VCE English and Literature.