

# Asian-Australian Children's Literature: Interviews with Seven Authors

Kirsty Murray  
Sally Rippin  
Steve Tolbert  
Allan Baillie  
Gabrielle Wang  
Rosanne Hawke  
Chris Cheng

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Image by Kathy Panton

## Overview

This collection of interviews brings together seven Australian children’s authors whose work has often featured Asian settings, or focused on Asian or Asian-Australian characters. The authors in question—Kirsty Murray, Sally Rippin, Steve Tolbert, Allan Baillie, Gabrielle Wang, Rosanne Hawke, and Christopher Cheng—were each asked several questions about their work, particularly with regard to setting. Some authors were also asked about the relationships between their own experiences of travel or migration and their writing.

These interviews were conducted as one of the outcomes of the Asian-Australian Children’s Literature and Publishing (AACLAP) project, which is led by the Queensland University of Technology and funded by the Australian Research Council as part of AustLit’s Linkage, Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities (LIEF) Grant in 2011.

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## Interview with Kirsty Murray

*Kirsty Murray was born and raised in Australia, but has lived in various countries since her teenage years. Her novels often have Asian settings or characters. The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong (2006) examines Irish-Chinese-Australian teenager Maeve's search to work out where she belongs after the death of her mother. India Dark (2010) is based on the true story of a troupe of child performers who were stranded in India in 1910. It won the NSW Premier's Young People's History Prize in 2011.*

**When you were fifteen, you moved with your family to Canada and finished your secondary schooling in Toronto. Your writing very often deals with migrants, or people who are changed by a trip overseas. Do you think that your own experience of moving overseas shaped your writing? If so, how?**

Moving to Canada when I was fifteen proved to be a relatively easy introduction to the immigrant experience. I didn't have to learn a new language and, as Canada shares many cultural values with Australia, I didn't suffer a huge degree of culture shock, but I did have to make a number of adjustments in how I navigated my way through the world. In Australia I had been very reliant on my large extended family and school friends that I had known since primary school for my sense of community. In Canada, I had to start afresh, so I suppose that helped me develop empathy for the plight of immigrant kids.

From 1990-1993 I lived in France and Wales with my three small children. That experience also shaped my understanding of living as an outsider, particularly the year in France. I didn't have more than a very primitive junior-high school grasp of French, yet I lived in the south of France in a small village where few locals spoke English. My children attended the local village school and the *ecole maternelle* [kindergarten] and they had to navigate their way through all the difficult circumstances that immigrant children face. Before long they were chatting away fluently in French and sometimes, when they wanted to be a little devious, they would deliberately talk very quickly in French, knowing I couldn't keep up with them. So I developed a much deeper understanding of the immigrant experience through watching my children develop a second cultural identity and through being outside that culture, as are many immigrant mothers.

All these experiences of living outside the culture of my birth occurred before I began to write professionally, so of course when I came to writing, they informed my work. But I believe many Australians, not only children from immigrant families, but also middle-class children whose families travel, feel a sense of either displacement or longing for connection with the wide world. This sense of longing also impacts on any family that raise their children with an expectation that the kids will eventually do a

gap-year or a big overseas trip, or more particularly return to their ancestors' homeland.

Although my family were fifth-generation white Australians, there was always a culture of "longing for the wide world" handed down to each generation of children. This occurred on both my mother's side of the family and my father's. It's no coincidence that both families were highly literate. I believe their reading – of predominately English/European literature – affected their world view and, through default, mine also. I see my writing as a logical extension of this heritage as well as my own life experiences.

**You've previously mentioned the importance of place to your writing. Can you talk a little about what you mean by that?**

I was an avid reader as a child and I lived in many imaginary landscapes. The settings of the novels that I read became part of my internal vision of the world. Sadly, I didn't read a lot of Australian children's fiction in comparison to the countless British, European and American novels that I consumed wholesale. I can count the books on my fingers that conjured Asia – a very short list that included the works of Rudyard Kipling, *The Story About Ping* (the duck), an assortment of Chinese fairytales and Lucy Fitch Perkins's *The Chinese Twins*. So, as a child reader, most of Asia drew a blank in terms of landscape and narrative.

Although I spent the first fifteen years of my life in Australia, I spent only a very limited amount of time in the countryside. Most of my vision of Australia stretched no further than my suburban back yard whereas I had epic vistas in my mind of other countries. As an adult, I've travelled extensively around Australia. I now know its landscapes well. But I wish I had had a better sense of the place as a child – especially an imaginary sense of it. In many ways, my own children don't have as strong a connection with Australian landscape as I'd like them to have but at least they had more opportunities to develop a taste for it than I did myself. In my fiction, I hope to create an imaginative bridge for younger readers, no matter what country they come from, that will give them a sense of Australian landscape.

When I decided to write *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong* my principal interest in Asia was its connection to Australia from both a geographic and cultural perspective. Over the course of the last decade I've travelled more widely in Asia, visiting China, Indonesia, Malaysia and India, often for extensive visits. I've tried also to overcome my early lack of understanding of Asia through reading Asian literature in translation. The author Gabrielle Wang read sections of both *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong* and the novel that preceded it *A Prayer for Blue Delaney*, to check for cultural and linguistic authenticity. I also did a short course in Chinese cuisine with Gabrielle's mother, Mabel Wang, as well as a course in Mandarin Chinese through the CAE.

All fiction conjures place one way or another, sometimes powerfully, sometimes only sketchily, but place is an essential ingredient of any story. All stories unfold in a



Figure 1 Kirsty Murray's *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong* (Allen and Unwin, 2006).

specific setting and landscape. If the author fails to conjure the place, the reader will create one for the narrative. In my work, I try and give a strong sense of each place that I write about, to conjure it vividly enough for the young reader to both enter and understand it through their imagination. Once a landscape is internalised, the reader can place themselves more confidently in that world and feel a sense of connection to that place if and when they do eventually visit it in reality.

**You had an Asialink Residency in India, where you were writer-in-residence at the University of Madras for four months. During this time, you also conducted research for your book *India Dark*. How do you generally research the spatial settings of your books? Do you always visit the places in which they are set?**

To conjure a place in my writing I generally like to spend a lot of time simply walking through it. India was a huge challenge because in many places it's simply not practical to walk for hours on end. It's too hot! So in addition to walking I spent a lot of time in cars, buses, autos (auto rickshaws/tut-tuts), and on trains. When trying to see a place from the perspective of a character, I try and imagine being inside their skin and looking out through their eyes.

Every morning when I set out to explore the places visited by the characters in *India Dark*, I asked myself – "How would Poesy or Tilly see this place? What would Charlie do here? How would these children experience these places and what would they notice first?"

Fiction is a powerful medium for truth-telling. But it's difficult, if not impossible, to tell the truth about things you have only imagined. I don't believe you have to experience everything your characters experience – imagination and empathy can bring you close to other people's lives – but physically experiencing a place can help you conjure it more fully in prose and add an extra layer of veracity to the story.



Figure 2 *India Dark* (Allen and Unwin, 2010).

**In *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong*, Maeve is an Australian girl with a Chinese mother, and an Irish father whom she has never met. When her mother dies, Maeve is forced to develop a closer relationship with her Chinese grandparents. She later goes on a school trip to Ireland, and on the way visits Hong Kong. There Maeve has a peculiar sense of déjà vu. She says**

to her teacher, McCabe: "It's as if I'm being haunted, but not in a bad way. I have this weird feeling that I've been here before" (192). McCabe says, "Some people believe that we carry our ancestors' memories with us, even if we never knew them [...] They call it race memory" (192). Can you talk a little more about this?

When I was seventeen years old my parents took me to the Welsh midlands for a holiday. We stayed in a sixteenth century house in the countryside and I fell completely in love with the landscape. I felt as though I'd been there before though, in hindsight, I think it was partly because I was so completely immersed in reading fantasy fiction at that time, particularly Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, so the place spoke to me and evoked all sorts of feelings of recognition and belonging. I swore to myself that one day I would go back and live in that landscape. If I hadn't known that my ancestors didn't actually come from the Welsh midlands, I would have imagined I was experiencing race memory. I did eventually return to Wales when I was in my thirties and I lived there for eighteen months in another sixteenth century cottage not far from the one I'd originally visited. I had the opportunity to explore a lot of the feelings I'd experienced at seventeen about place and belonging. I think there are some landscapes that simply speak to certain individuals and it's not necessarily connected to race memory, but I do find the concept of race memory fascinating. I read various articles and essays about Jungian concepts of race memory and also scientific theories about race memory being encoded on the genome before I began writing fiction though I can no longer remember the exact articles or where I first came across the idea.

While researching the history, culture and spirituality of the Irish I read several books by the Irish philosopher John O'Donohue. O'Donohue wrote: "The life and passion of a person leaves an imprint on the ether of a place. Love does not remain within the heart. It flows out to build a secret tabernacle in the landscape."

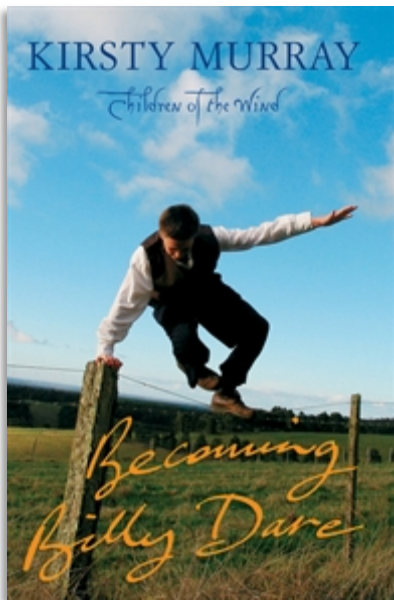


Figure 3 Kirsty Murray's *Becoming Billy Dare* (Allen and Unwin, 2004) is part of the author's Children of the Wind series.

I think this sentiment links very much to a belief in sacred sites. Connection to place can have a mystic quality. It's an idea common amongst indigenous peoples and something I think immigrant nations crave – a sense of belonging to a place in a powerful and physical sense. History, but more specifically narrative fiction, can give you that connection. Creating that connection to place was a concept that I wanted to explore in writing the Children of the Wind series.

When I travelled across Ireland researching the stories for the series, I had a slightly spooky experience in County Clare. My great-grandfather was named David McNamara and his family were from County Clare, specifically the rocky plain in the west known as The Burren. I used incidents from my great-grandfather's life in the second novel of the series, *Becoming Billy Dare*.

Distance has a funny way of manifesting itself in Ireland. The winding roads can take far longer to navigate than is indicated by the distance on the map. I had set out from Cork (which is in the south) hoping to reach The Burren before dark, but as night fell I found myself driving down a maze of pitch-black roads fenced in by drystone walls.

I was searching for a village called Corofin which is on the edge of The Burren but decided I'd lost my way when all of a sudden I felt 100% certain everything was going to be okay, even though I had no idea where I was. It was so dark on the road that I couldn't see any signposts, but when I drove into the next village I saw a pub named "David McNamara's" – my great-grandfather's name – so I knew I was in the right place. I'd found Corofin by accident. But I had also experienced what could be termed race memory. Generations can be exiled from a landscape and yet still feel a sense of belonging when their ancestors return if they have had a tradition of sharing stories of the past. I believe this is the true essence of race memory.

In writing Maeve's story, I wanted her to have a similar experience. I love Hong Kong and find it very evocative. I've had a sense of déjà vu there, too – though I have absolutely no genetic connection to the place. But the city is so complex and vibrant that I imagine if you had the least little sense of genetic or cultural connection it might evoke powerful feelings. So I gave the feeling that I experienced in Wales as a teenager to Maeve. I don't think the experience is unique – I think it's a universal experience that many young people feel when they first travel. I've met countless teenagers during school visits that have spoken of having similar feelings when they've travelled to places connected to their family's past but more often they tell of feeling connected to landscapes that are related to their cultural experiences. In creative writing workshops, most children find it very difficult to write a piece of fiction that is set in a landscape they actually know. Most of them set their stories in landscapes, which they vividly describe, that are based on their reading or film experiences.

Ultimately, the narratives we hear when young help form our connection to place even more strongly than our genetic ties.

***India Dark* is based on a true story, and follows a troupe of Australian child performers as they perform shows in various countries in South-East Asia around 1910. The two narrators, Tilly and Poesy, have quite different ideas of what the "truth" is as they narrate the troupe's story. Poesy is sometimes accused by other characters of seeing only the truths that she wants to see. Fellow performer Charlie says to her at one point, "You say you want to see things but then you only look at the squirrels and the birds and the buildings. You ask questions, but they're the wrong questions. You don't look at the people" (166). Can you talk a little about the extensive historical research that you did, and how this might have fed into *India Dark's* interest in truth, lies, and perspective?**

The first time I ever visited India was in 2007 to conduct research for *India Dark*. I had spent more than a year intensively researching the story in Australia but knew I couldn't write the novel without visiting the places where the action had unfolded. I didn't want to use other authors' second-hand descriptions of the places in India and southeast Asia that the real children had visited in 1909/1910. I felt held hostage to the true story on which the novel was based, but even if I had invented the entire narrative, I still would have felt compelled to visit India.

As I stated before, fiction is a form of truth-telling. It's about imposing a narrative form on life events so that the reader can make sense of an experience. The experiences of the real-life children who were members of the original theatre troupe were very complicated. When I read through all the various records, newspaper reports and court

documents detailing what happened during their time in India, there were so many conflicting reports that it was very difficult to decide where exactly the truth lay. Each child had their own version of events and in their reported statements each of them laid emphasis on a different aspect of the difficulties they'd encountered while touring India.

Each child character in the novel matched an existing member of the original theatre troupe, but as there were scant records to tell what the children were really like, I gave each of them characteristics that would allow me to explore the ideas of truth and lies that lay at the heart of the story.

When I originally drafted out the story, the characters of Prem and his sister Meenakshi – who were totally fictitious – were to have much bigger roles. I wanted the Australian children to seriously engage with Indian children, but after spending time in India I decided this was too coy and one of those awful devices that children's authors sometimes use to fudge grim truths. It would have been inauthentic and historically inaccurate to pretend that working-class Australian child performers would engage with middle-class Indian children, or any Indian children for that matter, at the time of the British Raj. In truth, the Australian children as members of a white imperialist culture and as working performers who were kept under strict watch by a manipulative manager would have had little direct engagement with and even less understanding of the Asian cultures they encountered.

Sadly, Meenakshi became no more than a single line reference to a girl the reader never meets and Prem's role, though still important, was diminished.

I shaped Charlie very carefully to be an exception – the one character that would really try and engage with Asian cultures, the only one with a genuine curiosity and thirst for what the other children found irrelevant, frightening and foreign. Through Charlie, the reader gains a more sympathetic and authentic vision of India. He is, perhaps, a little too 21st century in his sensitivities, though with all the Kiplingesque sense of adventure of a good Edwardian boy. Interestingly, Charlie seems to be the single most popular character in the novel with readers. Many readers have told me how much they liked him and they've also expressed unease at how unreliable Poesy was as a narrator. But Poesy was a very authentic child of her era, as was Tilly. It's hard for contemporary readers to identify with some of their ideas and values but 1910 was a racist, imperialist era and I tried to make the characters true to their time, without making them dislikeable.

The case of the Pollard children was cited in Hansard when the scandal reached Australia and was raised in parliament as an issue. The debate led to moves to tighten the white Australia policy to prevent the movement of white Australian children to Asia. Ironically, it had little impact on child labour laws.

I was drawn to the original true story because, apart from the fact it was a ripping yarn, I would like to develop a body of work that might open up the possibility of an imaginative exchange with Asia both for myself and for young Australian readers.

From my very first novel, I've tried to incorporate ideas about Australia's historical connection with Asia. It began in a very small way with making the protagonist in my first novel have a Sri Lankan father whom he has never met. Most of the subsequent novels had at least one Asian character, if only in a minor role. As Charlie implied in the quote you included in your question, you have to look at the people if you want to understand the place.



## Interview with Sally Rippin

*Sally Rippin was born in Darwin and spent most of her childhood in South-East Asia. As an adult, she studied traditional Chinese painting in China. She has also lived in the south of France. She is an author and illustrator of children's and young adult books, and has focused most recently on her Billie B. Brown series. Several of her works focus on Asian or Asian-Australian characters, including the picture books Fang Fang's Chinese New Year (1996), Speak Chinese, Fang Fang! (1996) and What a Mess, Fang Fang! (1998), and the young adult novels Chenxi and the Foreigner (2002) and Leopard Skin (2003).*

**During your childhood, you moved around a great deal and lived in many different countries. How do you think these experiences might have influenced your writing?**

Moving country many times with my family as a child, then later as an adult on my own, has had a profound influence on my writing. As children, my sisters and I spent a lot of time in hotel rooms, where our primary source of entertainment was reading, writing and drawing. My mother bought us lots of books to keep us entertained, and when I'd finished reading them, I would often make my own. Writing, drawing, making stories was a very portable and accessible creative outlet that I could do in a hotel room, an aeroplane or grandparent's house, when we had few other resources to keep us amused. As an adult, travel opens my eyes and helps me see things in a fresh way – even my own environment. I believe one of the keys to good writing is to have an open mind and to see things as if for the first time. When we travel, everything is new and fascinating, and so to bring that same sense of awe and wonder to our everyday lives makes great material for writing. Having spent much of my childhood as a “foreigner,” albeit a privileged expatriate, has helped me empathise with other “outsiders,” whether they be migrants, troubled teens or artists. These make up many of the characters I write about.

**You are an illustrator as well as a writer. Do you think your training and skills as an artist affect how you write—in your setting of scenes, for instance, or the narrators' attention to detail?**

Definitely. Often when I am in a new environment I imagine how I would capture it on paper, both in colour and medium as an illustrator, as well as words as a writer. One of the best things my artist training has given me is to aim to see things with a neutral eye. This became particularly evident when I was studying life-drawing. I realised quite early on that the same human figure could be rendered grotesquely or with grace and

beauty, depending on the artist's projection or intention. It occurred to me that there really was no such thing as "beautiful" or "ugly," that these definitions were purely subjective and often cultural. Jeffrey Smart shows that this can also be done with landscape; a highway can be painted with as much care and affection as a field of flowers.

**Your novel *Chenxi and the Foreigner* examines China around the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. First published in 2002, the novel was re-published in 2008 in a revised edition that included stronger language, a sex scene, and more discussion of Chinese politics. Can you talk a little about some of the changes that you made, and why you made them?**

I explain this in depth in the afterword of the new edition but, in summary, I was given the very rare opportunity to revisit a book I had written when I was in my early twenties. With over a decade of writing behind me and many more books published, I now felt much more confident to include the things I had not felt mature enough to explore in my first edition; most notably the sex and politics. The range of books being published for young adults had also changed significantly since the first edition of my novel so, with the encouragement of my publisher, we decided to publish the new edition as what can be loosely termed as "Crossover Fiction," which essentially meant that the audience would be older teenagers and young adults. In writing the first edition I was worried about displeasing the gatekeepers of children's literature of parents, teachers and librarians by including a few swear words and a sex scene, so I took them out. The second edition feels like a more honest version.

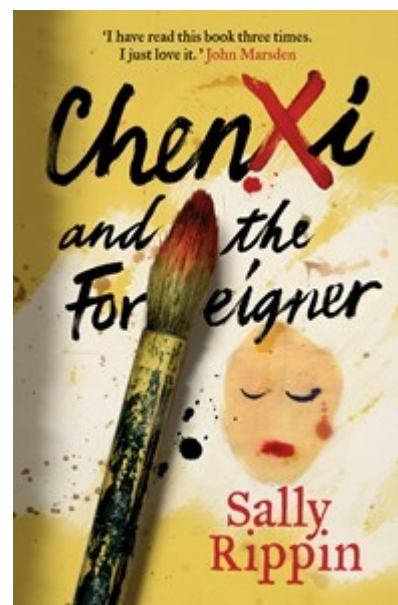


Figure 4 The revised edition of Sally Rippin's *Chenxi and the Foreigner* (Text, 2008)

**In *Leopard Skin*, Ellie begins a relationship with Sun, whom she meets in her taekwondo class. Sun is Vietnamese, and being with him makes Ellie realise the racism of those around her, including her father and her friends. She also realises that Sun's world is quite different from her own. This is similar in some ways to the experiences of the protagonists in *Just One Wish* and *Chenxi and the Foreigner*. Would you say that this is a recurrent theme in your work, this interest in recognising and overcoming cross-cultural or personal differences?**

This is definitely a theme that appears often in my work. John Marsden once said to me that he writes "to understand the world." For me, ever since I was child, I have never been able to understand how people can be treated so differently just because of the circumstances of their birth, so this is probably the one theme I explore constantly. I am humbled by the fact that the same child, born to a different family, could have had a completely different life, and how easily that child could have been me. I have had an extremely fortunate life, in large part due to the fact that my parents were Anglo and

fairly well-off and there is little in this world that was denied to me. But this is something I never take for granted, knowing how easily this could have been different and having seen these differences first-hand from very young.

## Interview with Steve Tolbert

*Steve Tolbert was born and raised in the United States, and came to Australia in his mid-twenties. He has written nine young-adult novels, and a collection of short stories. Tolbert's work is often set in South-East Asia, or Tasmania, or both. Some of the most common settings include Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Tolbert's work often involves wilderness settings, as well, and it tends to examine complex themes such as war, religious freedom, terrorism, and death.*

**You grew up in the United States and came to live in Australia when you were about 25. Do you think your experiences as a migrant have shaped your writing? If so, how?**

Yes, for sure. From when I was about a year old (when my city-loving mother left my war-traumatised father after spending six months with him in remote Alaska) until I boarded my Qantas flight for Sydney in late 1969 I was constantly on the move in the USA and Western Canada, particularly in Southern California, Idaho, Hawaii and Vancouver. I went to four different primary schools and three different high schools. After a three-year stint in the American Navy, served on board an aircraft carrier, I attended six different universities, most of them on a part-time basis while working part-time to support my studies and the purchase of my next airline ticket. Though I developed a number of friendships, I was never much of a joiner, more a watcher than a "belonger" in the USA. So that by the time I migrated to Australia, I was accustomed to living solo, living relatively homeless inside my mind.

That solo lifestyle didn't change from 1970 to 1978 while I worked at a high school in Leichhardt, Sydney composed mostly of ethnic Greeks and Italians, in a largely aboriginal school in Derby and a heavily English-migrant high school in Kwinana, West Australia, and in a couple of schools in Northern Tasmania. Only in 1979, when I acquired a good Hobart wife, dog and house did my transient days end and my wall painting, grass mowing, nappy changing and tree and tomato growing begin.

Nowadays, I break out of my retirement cell on Mondays to work as a volunteer in a Migrant English class in Hobart, twenty-five kilometres away. So much to admire about the migrants I work with: their instant smiles and warm greetings whenever I (or anybody else) enter the class, their sense of humour and politeness, their resilience and courage in having overcome living up to twenty years in refugee camps (in the case of Bhutanese refugees), and their driving desire to find some form of work and do everything in their power to improve the lives of their children. Like a Geelong grand final win, I find them inspiring.

In having spent my formative years as a type of "internal" migrant in the USA and Western Canada and a proper English-speaking (well, American anyway) one in Australia, I experienced first-hand the effects of solitude, of living outside the circle of established social and professional groups, of trying to work out cultural norms and

expectations and exactly where I fitted in the scheme of things, just like all migrants have to do. Though, unlike the great majority of migrants, I sort of spoke the lingo on arrival here.

Write about what you know and feel a passion for, the Hemingway adage goes. With regard to the migrant experience, I reckon I've done that.

**Your writing is strongly evocative of landscape, whether it's the jungle of Cambodia, the mountains of Tibet, or the coast of Tasmania. Can you talk a little about the importance of place in your writing, and also about how you research the places that you write about?**

I spent a lot of my early youth gaining impressions of equatorial rain forests from Tarzan movies, of believing that high mountains were accessible only to mountain goats and Edmund Hillary-types and that deserts were the preserves of snakes and little else. Not that long ago I received a letter from an Alaskan relative that had been sent to Hobart, Tanzania instead of Tasmania. Fortunately it had the right post code on it.

There's a lot of ignorance out there about this so-called globalised world we live in. For over thirty years I worked as a high school teacher, mostly teaching Social Science and English. In my grade ten Social Science classes I placed great importance on trying to improve students' global awareness – geographical, political and cultural. Outside the classroom I've tried to interest and inform young adults through my stories, particularly with regards to Asia. In my mind – though I'm grandfather age now, not the flashiest of computer operators, have a strong aversion to Facebook and must sit in the Hobart mall surreptitiously listening to young adults in order to keep in touch with their language patterns – I still think writing young adult stories that inform is a worthwhile pursuit. Hard to bury forever my years as a high school teacher I suppose.

In a question below you mention how my characters "are often in transit" tracking, motoring or sailing through challenging places. That's true, and in some of the books the remote, often raw, wild places, are meant to provide obstacles that test my characters' resolve. For example, *Channeary*. At the start of the Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia, Channeary's mother and baby sister are killed by a Hanuman snake while crossing the Cardamom Mountains. Thousands of Cambodians did die – many through starvation and disease, but also by snake-bite – while fleeing to Thai border refugee camps in 1975-76. In Channeary's case, she is forced to again face her mountain demons later on along the south coast of Tasmania. She must find the courage to either overcome the mountain obstacles, or die trying.

Aboard a people-smuggling boat, the Indian Ocean presents the same challenge for Soraya in *Dreaming Australia*. In *Stepping Back* an entire country poses one huge challenge for Somaly and her mother when they return to a Cambodia still ravaged by war and turmoil.

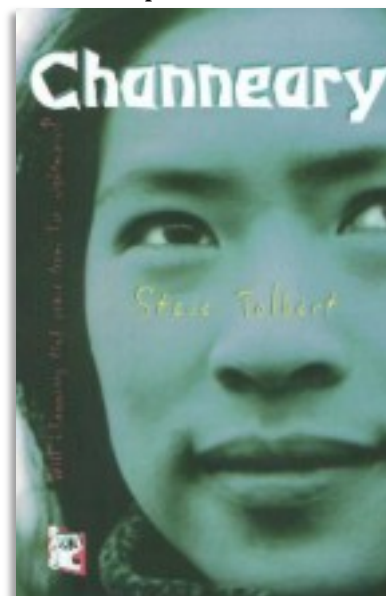


Figure 5 Steve Tolbert's *Channeary* (Longman Cheshire, 1991).

Wild, remote places can provide solace as well. In *Escape to Kalimantan* Jack's father – a science teacher, staunch environmentalist and orang-utan enthusiast – suffers deep depression after his daughter is killed in the Port Arthur massacre and his wife abandons the household. Young Jack devises a scheme to get his father out of Tasmania and up to the Tanjung Puting National Park, an orang-utan rehabilitation site in Southern Kalimantan, Indonesia. The rawness of the landscape, his first meeting with orang-utans on a feeding platform, the constant orchestra of natural sounds, and his involvement in efforts to save orang-utans and their habitat combine to renew the father's interest in life, and prove transformative for his son as well.

Wilderness can serve as both an obstacle to overcome and a place of seclusion and respite. The Himalayas serve the latter purpose in both *Eyeing Everest* and *Tracking the Dalai Lama*. Flinders Island does too in *Packing Smack, Talking Wombats*.

Places don't necessarily have to be remote to be challenging though. Bustling Asian towns and cities can be extremely challenging, even for the die-hard traveller. Just being exposed to a different culture – including a surfing culture – can intimidate. In "Surfing for Wayan," 17-year-old Jacob returns to Bali after a four year interval. Once terrified of surfboards, he's there to surf wild for four people, including his brother, killed in the 2002 Bali bombing. Realising that ambition, even in touristy Bali, proves difficult. In *O'Leary, JI Terrorist Hunter*, Michael O'Leary – a sufferer of a mental disorder – dupes his father and older sister into believing he's going to visit a close friend in Port Macquarie. He then heads to Indonesia to make contact with the Jemaah Islamiah extremists responsible for the death of his mother. How he navigates his way around the strange, at times threatening JI heartland of Solo, Central Java tests his resolve big-time. "Going solo in Solo" might have been a better story title.

Constant themes of mine are young adults adjusting to solitude and strangeness and the contrast between traditional Australian and Asian values. For such themes to ring true, a writer needs to establish a strong sense of place.

In order to research stories, I make full use of libraries, the internet and my passport. Of course, travelling to areas I want to use for a story setting is the best and, yes, sometimes the most challenging part.

To do the research for *Stepping Back* I travelled to United Nations-controlled Cambodia in 1992, primarily to visit a Red Cross-sponsored hospital fifty kilometres south of Phnom Penh. I'd been told the hospital was performing more mine victim limb amputations than any other facility in the country. As it turned out, surgeons – including an American one from Boston – were performing a lot of amputations, but primarily on people who'd crashed their motor scooters, rarely on those who'd stepped on mines.

In 1994 a friend and I spent ten days walking up the Everest Track in Nepal. I'd not told him my primary reason for doing the trip, and he was mystified by the voluminous notes I was writing in a diary. When *Eyeing Everest* was published I enjoyed handing him a copy and explaining what all the notes had been for.

In 1996, as part of a six week wander through parts of Indonesia, I flew to Pangkalanbun, Southern Kalimantan in order to visit Camp Leakey, a well-known orang-utan rehabilitation centre, operated since the 1950s by one of the three "Angels of the Primates," Dr Birute Galdikas from America. (The other two "Angels" were Dian Fossey – who was killed in the 1980s in Rwanda – and Jane Goodall, who worked in West Africa). I wanted to do some research for *Escape to Kalimantan*. I hired a small *klotok* (riverboat) and two crewmen and we motored up the brown, sediment-heavy Sekonyer

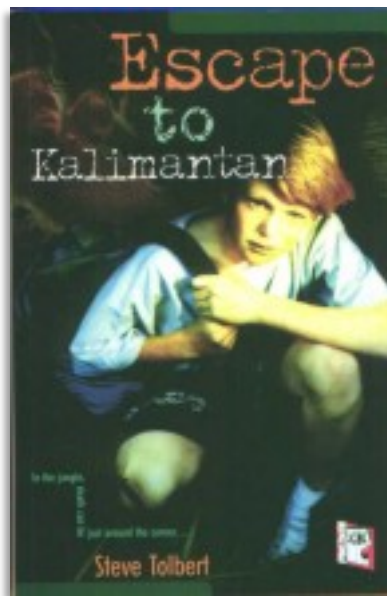


Figure 6 Tolbert's *Escape to Kalimantan* (Addison Wesley Longman Australia, 1998).

River for half a day before turning right into a narrow, overgrown tributary. At the end of the tributary were Camp Leakey, park rangers carrying buckets of bananas and lots of orang-utans descending tree tops anxious to get to their feeding platform to grab the pick of the bananas. I'd just finished reading Galdikas's autobiography *Reflections of Eden* and I was excited about the prospect of meeting her. She'd been told a solo foreigner was on the premises and I'd been told she was due to arrive at the platform at anytime. When Galdikas – weathered, heavy with age and looking every bit like the primates she cared for – did approach, I stepped to the side of the track and greeted her as she passed. She turned, scowled and replied gruffly, "When are you leaving?"

Not what I'd hoped for. She ignored me the entire time I was there. Fortunately, Camp Leakey staff members were terrific. I spent three days researching the place, and sleeping and eating on the *klotok* tied up on the small wharf.

In *Escape to Kalimantan*, Jack and his father take the same trip by the same transport I did. While they too witness platform feeding time, there is no "Angel of the Primates" for them to deal with, though they do get deeply involved with orang-utan poachers who make a business of shooting female orang-utans and, if their babies survive falling out of trees, selling the babies to agents for Taiwanese wanting (and willing to pay five to ten thousand dollars) to raise orang-utans in their homes.

Other research trips were to the Tibetan enclave of Dharamsala, Northern India in 1998 to research *Tracking the Dalai Lama*; to the Woomera Detention Centre, South Australia in 2004 to research *Dreaming Australia*; to Flinders Island in 2005 to bike the island, camp and research *Packing Smack, Talking Wombats*; to Solo in Central Java, Indonesia in 2007 to research *O'Leary: JI Terrorist Hunter*; and to Northwest Thailand in 2009 and Myanmar in 2010 to do research for a manuscript I'm slowly working on entitled *Becoming Lady Gaga, Becoming Nan Pau*. In every one of these places too, memorable events occurred.

**Many of the places that you write about have quite complex political situations, and your books examine topics such as war, religious persecution, and terrorism. Are you consciously trying to document a particular time and place in each of your novels?**

In some stories I'm a trying to do that, yes. In *Channeary* I'm dealing with the Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia of the late 1970s. In *Stepping Back*, the post-Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia. In *Dreaming Australia*, both Afghanistan and Woomera, South Australia about the time the first boat people started heading our way. In *Surfing for Wayan* and *O'Leary: JI Terrorist Hunter*, the post-2002 and 2005 Bali bombing years.

In addition, the particular times I wrote about in those books were the times when fundamentalism and/or fanaticism played havoc with people in those places.

In the other stories – *Settling South*, *Eyeing Everest*, *Escape to Kalimantan*, *Tracking the Dalai Lama* and *Packing Smack*, *Talking Wombats* – the time frames are broader (though the issues dealt with – especially in *Kalimantan* and *Tracking* – are no less important), so maybe they retain their contemporariness a bit better than the others.

**The characters in your books are often in transit, trekking through mountains or jungle, for instance, or travelling by boat. They often use this travel time to think through traumatic events that they've experienced, and to forge a closer relationship with a significant adult character. In some cases, the travel itself seems to be the catalyst for change. I was wondering if you could talk a little about how your experience of travel has shaped your writing—or, indeed, your life. Do you see travel itself as a transformative experience?**

Yes, you're right.

I'd like to comment about that idea of forging of "a closer relationship with a significant adult character." I have a daughter – Elise – and when she was young my wife and I took her travelling a lot, often into Asia. In *Channeary*, *Eyeing Everest* and *Packing Smack*, *Talking Wombats*, perhaps because of Elise's influence, I've written about girls in crisis fleeing their homes, arriving in remote places and developing friendships with mysteriously reclusive men; friendships that prove as transformative for the old, sour-faced men as they do for the girls.

In *Channeary* a bond develops between Channeary and Bill – the solitary crayfisherman and father of Channeary's Australian mother – as the two of them fish off Tasmania's south coast. I re-read chapter 25 occasionally and to this day I can't help tingling as Bill reads Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" to Channeary, how he – a strong Catholic – clears a spot on a shelf so Channeary's Buddha can sit next to his crucifix, and how their self-imposed barriers gradually break down and they confide in each other about the deaths of their loved ones. Two very solitary souls, from opposite ends of the earth, sharing their stories and emotions along a rugged, people-less coastline.

In *Eyeing Everest*, following the death of her mother, Meika sets out for Nepal to visit a father she's never met and who lives high up on the Everest Track. He turns out to be even more mysterious than she had presumed. But with the help of certain people, including his Nepalese wife, the father gradually steps out from the shadows and Meika comes to understand what led him to give up his life in Tasmania and retreat to Nepal.



Figure 7 Tolbert's *O'Leary, JI Terrorist Hunter* (Ginninderra, 2010) is set in Indonesia and Tasmania



*Packing Smack, Talking Wombats* is also a “quest” story. Jackson is a well-adjusted, trusting girl who plans to go to university in Melbourne. But through her trusting, she is also naive. She falls for street-wise Ben and unwittingly gets caught up in a drug deal gone wrong. Fearing for her life, she escapes to the remote eastern side of Flinders Island. There she meets John, a young, shy vet student, and Pete, an elderly hermit with ghosts and demons of his own to bury. While Jackson's and Pete's developing friendship is a feature, the story's main focus is on the relationship that builds between cityfied Jackson and deeply countrified John.

A developing romance between a young Cambodian/Australian girl and young Asian boy features in *Stepping Back*. In *Escape to Kalimantan, Surfing for Wayan* and *O'Leary: JI Terrorist Hunter* the focus is more on troubled Australian boys' relationships with Asian girls. Invariably the girls serve as cultural guides, but also in dispassionate ways help calm the male protagonists' inner turmoil. The youthful relationships that I find most satisfying in my books are Jackson's and John's in *Packing Smack* and zany O'Leary's and Sugi's (a bright Muslim girl who works in her father's Solo pharmacy) in *Ji Terrorist Hunter*. I often read pages 96 to 100 in *Terrorist Hunter* and can't help smiling when the “flipped-out” O'Leary, having run out of his Australian-prescribed “serenity” tablets, enters Sugi's father's pharmacy demanding a repeat supply. How Sugi coaxes and escorts him to a doctor's office for counselling, how she deals with his panic attack as they wait near a fish pond just prolongs my enjoyment, my smile. I love the ending too, when Sugi unexpectedly turns up to accompany O'Leary – halfway at least – on a mini-bus back to Bali. A version of *Eat, Pray, Love* – instant love and spiritual enlightenment – *O'Leary: JI Terrorist Hunter* is not. Not one of my books is.

Earlier, I listed the places I've visited to do research. I always carry a notebook with me and keenly watch what passes by, often encountering people and situations that feel right to include in what is at the time a very vague, pliable storyline. With a few exceptions (I've never been to Tibet, Afghanistan, Pakistan or the Cardamom Mountains of Cambodia) I've taken the journeys my main protagonists have taken. As they are challenged so have I been. Perhaps the greatest challenge for me is conducting research in areas where horrific events have occurred. One such place is Bali, where the 2002 and 2005 bombings at Kuta and Jimbaran Bay are still raw in the hearts of many people, both in Australia and Indonesia.

Trying to write about such events in *Surfing for Wayan* and *O'Leary: JI Terrorist Hunter* – while trying to avoid sentimentality or mawkishness, yet still do justice to the gravity of the subject matter – has been hugely thought-provoking. Yet, while struggling to write those stories, I was helped by something I once read somewhere in the past: that fiction can be a window to the truth when other forms of words fail us.

## Interview with Allan Baillie

*Allan Baillie was born in Scotland and grew up in Australia. He began writing stories while still at school. He worked as a journalist in Asia in the late 1960s, an experience that would influence his fiction. Some of his works with Asian settings include Little Brother (Cambodia), Rebel! (Burma), Krakatoa Lighthouse (Indonesia), and The China Coin (China). Baillie's books have won and been shortlisted for many awards, including the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, and the Australian Multicultural Children's Literature Awards.*

**You've travelled extensively throughout South-East Asia. How does your travel inform your writing, and what is it about a place that makes you decide to set a story in it?**

The stories are there. I don't pick the place, I fiddle with characters. So I met "Vithy" of *Little Brother* in the refugee camp hospital at Khao-I-Dang on Thai-Cambodia border.

**You arrived in Australia from Scotland when you were seven years old. Do you think your experiences as a migrant have shaped your writing, particularly the international focus of your work?**

Not migrant from UK but the time in my years in Victoria. I moved to Emerald in Victoria, Geelong, Drysdale, Portarlington, Jolimont and Moorabbin. That taught me that people are in the same basically everywhere.

**How do you research the places that you write about?**

Both reading books and getting there. In *Krakatoa Lighthouse* [my wife] Agnes and I climbed the [new] Krakatoa.

**Your stories are sometimes set in recent history and around significant events. For example, *Rebel!* is set in Burma in 1990, and *The China Coin* during the student uprising in Tiananmen Square in 1989. You were actually present in China for the latter event. Can you talk a little about**

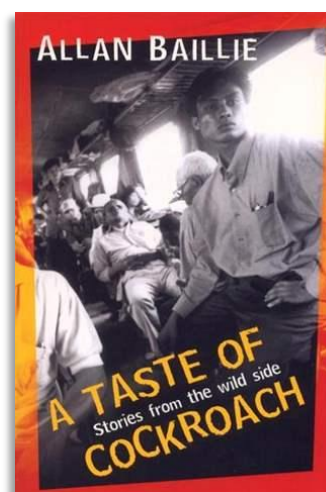


Figure 8 Allan Baillie's *A Taste of Cockroach* (Penguin, 2005) contains stories set in South-East Asia.

**your experiences of writing fiction and historical fiction, and the different demands that the two might have?**

I did go to Burma for brief time but *Rebel!* was hearing a story from a Burmese, Dr Than Lwyn. His story is in *A Taste of Cockroach* roughly. *The China Coin* was simply a story of two people looking for roots in China and that came from a time when I was stuck in a very old village while touring China as a CBCA delegate in 1987. I took my family to China in 1989, went to two villages, came down the Yangtze and finished at Beijing. We spent some time with a family in the first village and some of the characters were based on the family.

As we moved around China the students' activities boiled around us. I took a photograph of Tiananmen Square, which the artist has captured on the cover of the book – along with my daughter, Lynne. I then saw my family off to Sydney and I was going to work around Beijing for another fortnight.

But three nights after the family left I woke up in my hotel to the sound of gunfire and shouting. The last three chapters in the book are basically what happened to me from that point on. The book now was changed and things I had seen to be told.



Figure 9 *The China Coin* (Viking, 1991) was inspired by Baillie's experiences in China.

**In *The China Coin*, Leah and her mother Joan travel to China following the death of Leah's father. Joan is Malaysian-born Chinese, and has lived in Australia for a long time. As the mother and daughter try to find Joan's ancestral village, it seems to Leah that Joan changes by the day, as though she takes on a different persona in each different city and town. Do you think that this is one of the results of having attachments to more than one place: that one has slightly different identities in each place?**

Maybe they are affected by what's happening.

## Interview with Gabrielle Wang

*Gabrielle Wang grew up in Victoria. She is Chinese Australian, and her great-grandfather Ah Kew Chen came to Victoria to work on the goldfields in 1853. Wang always wanted to be an artist, and studied graphic design at university. She later lived in Taiwan and China, where she studied Chinese painting and calligraphy. She subsequently studied writing, and her first children's novel, The Garden of Empress Cassia, was published in 2002.*

**You've previously stated: "All my books so far have something to do with Chinese things, because that is my background and it is always best to write about what you know." But you've also said that you didn't know much about Chinese culture growing up, and it's something you've learned about partly through living in Taiwan and China. Can you talk about this learning process, and about that time spent living overseas, and how it might have affected your writing subsequently?**

A common theme throughout all my books is the notion of home and the feeling of belonging. I didn't grow up knowing the Chinese language or culture so I went to live in Taiwan and China for about seven years to discover my roots. I had thought that I might find a home there, but I soon realised that China was an alien place built upon layers and layers of history, philosophy and beliefs. Culture is gained through osmosis and there was no way I could ever be a part of that society after just a few years. The best I could do was to study Mandarin and Chinese painting, but I would always be considered an outsider, a *hua qiao* or overseas Chinese. This idea of belonging I explored more fully in my YA novel, *Little Paradise*. I believe that everybody has their own "little paradise." It might be a place, or being with someone you love, or a spot inside yourself like when you paint or garden or swim or do taichi. My little paradise is my writing and my art. Living overseas has allowed me to see both the Australian and Chinese cultures more clearly. My novels hopefully act as a bridge – a way to understanding and accepting difference.

I did not start writing until I lived away from Australia. Perhaps that was the impetus, the spark. Everything is new when you live in a foreign country. Every day is exciting and emotionally charged. You can't help reinventing yourself. I lived in Taiwan for five years studying Chinese language and painting and working as a graphic designer for an American company. It was there that I wrote and illustrated my first picture book. The illustrations were okay but the story was very bad and it was never published. I then went to further my painting studies at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in the beautiful city of Hangzhou, China. In the mid 1980s, China was still relatively closed to the outside world. There were very few foreigners living there and conditions were primitive, so coming from a Western culture it took me out of my comfort zone. All of this was good fodder for writing novels.

**You've written quite a few historical novels now. How do you research the cultural, geographic, and temporal settings of your novels?**

The landscape of my novel is very important to me. No matter what genre I'm writing in I need to be able to picture the setting in my mind as if I was watching a movie. For example, *Little Paradise* is set in Melbourne and Shanghai during the 1940s. I lived in Hangzhou but visited Shanghai at least once a month. The foyer of the Peace Hotel was the only place you could buy instant coffee (no other coffee was available) in those days, so we would make a special trip on the train to pick up our supply and to see the big city. I was able to use those memories of the place to write from. I also used photos

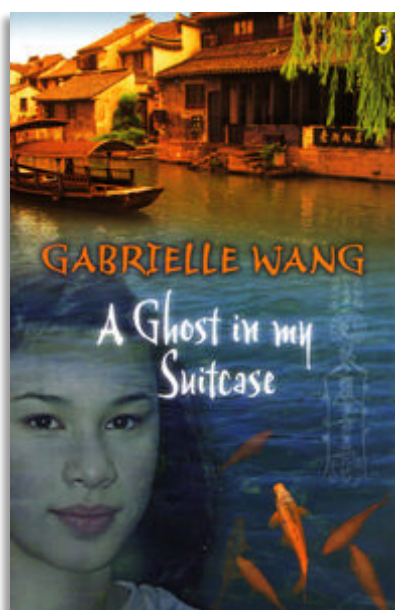


Figure 10 Gabrielle Wang's *A Ghost in My Suitcase* (Puffin, 2009) is set in China.

taken during those pre-Communist days and interviewed people. *Little Paradise* is based on my mother's story so it was easy to get first-hand information. Luckily those who lived during that time are old but still alive. The anecdotes people relate to me are the best way I find to research story, time and place. Truth is definitely stranger than fiction.

The Poppy books from the Our Australian Girl series are set in 1864. As my main character is part Aborigine and part Chinese, Maxine Briggs, Koorie Liaison officer at the State Library of Victoria, read through all the chapters with Aboriginal content for approval. Being of Chinese descent, I am highly sensitive to culture and getting things right. Many of the towns that exist today in Victoria did not exist in 1864. I remember being close to the final draft of *Meet Poppy* when I happened to look at an old map I had purchased two years before in order to get a sense of the geography of Victoria back then. My heart gave a lurch when I saw that a town Poppy was visiting was not on this map. I

groaned. Now the problem was to find a town that did exist. I did find a town that would fit but it was on the other side of the Murray River, in New South Wales. I groaned again. How was I going to get Poppy across that wide river?

Writing is like the quilt on a king size bed. You smooth out one crease and others appear.

**Your young adult novel *Little Paradise* is about 17-year-old Mirabel, a Chinese-Australian girl who falls pregnant to her Chinese boyfriend in 1940s Melbourne. You drew quite a bit on your mother's life story to write the character of Mirabel, and the cover illustration of a young woman in a blue dress is actually a photograph of your mother at that time. How did the process of researching and writing this book differ from your processes with your other books?**

*Little Paradise* was the hardest book I have written because it's my mother's story. Even though it's historical fiction, it is so personal. My mum is still alive and I was very conscious of her approving it before it went to publication. The most difficult part was

the secret she had kept for forty years – that my brother was illegitimate. To be pregnant without being married, while common today, was in those days during the war a shameful thing. What made it worse was that she came from a very Christian family and a prominent Chinese one at that. My grandfather knew many important people of the day.

In fact, later on, it was because of these connections that my father was allowed into Australia. The White Australia Policy would normally have prevented this but my grandfather knew the then Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell.

Another reason why I found this book hard to write was because of the skeletons in the closet that came up during the research. I uncovered things about the family nobody had ever talked about. For example, in the 1930s and 40s China was occupied by Japan, then suffered devastating famine. Everyone was poor, especially in the countryside. People were even stripping bark from trees to boil for food. Following the war my grandfather died, leaving my grandmother alone, except for her three grown sons. By rights they should support her, but they had their own young families to feed. All this was revealed to me in an interview with my uncle who at the time was in Shanghai studying. When I asked him about his mother he suddenly broke down and couldn't go on. I had to stop the interview and drive him home. I felt terrible causing such distress to a usually bright and very happy 75-year-old, and with no idea why. I called his daughter Julia the following day to ask if she could enlighten me. She had been born in Shanghai and knew a lot more about my father's side of the family. Julia told me that it was her father who had found his mother hanging from a beam in her farmhouse. Instead of being a burden and one more mouth to feed, our grandmother decided to take her own life.

I wrote my grandmother into the story but with a completely different and joyous outcome. It is my tribute to her memory. Before I sent the manuscript to Penguin I gave it to my mother to read. This was a tense moment. What would I do if she wanted to change something? I waited nervously the whole day. Then I received her phone call. To my relief, she loved it.

**In your books, there is often a sense that time is not necessarily linear, but that the present can be haunted by incomplete business from the past—often in the shape of ghosts. *A Ghost in My Suitcase*, for instance, tells of Celeste's adventures in China with her ghosthunter grandmother. Like her grandmother, Celeste seems destined to be a ghosthunter—she is gifted with special ghost wrangling skills that only emerge when they are needed. Could you talk a little about the importance of supernatural and spiritual themes in your work?**

I have always been interested in alternate realities. The saying goes, "Seeing is believing," but really it's the other way around. Sometimes these realities bump up

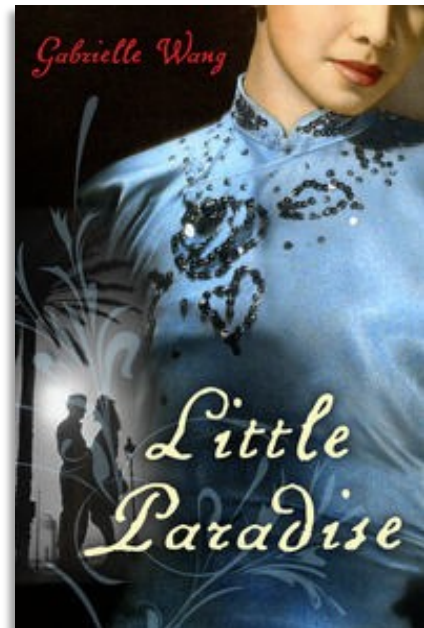


Figure 11 *Little Paradise* (Allen & Unwin, 2010) is based on the real events of Gabrielle Wang's mother's life. The cover image is a photograph of Wang's mother.

against each other and you get a glimpse into another world. Now that I'm a writer I have more and more of these kinds of experiences because writers are great observers. They sit back quietly and watch and make connections.

Since my art school days, I have been interested in Taoism. *The Hidden Monastery* (Penguin, 2006) is about a Taoist monastery that exists on another plane. The main character Jax finds this monastery in a Queensland rainforest because it is his birthright to become master of a powerful creature called Peng. The idea of Peng came from a metaphoric story told in verse by the great Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369 BCE – 286 BCE) and the novel opens with this story.

When I write, I combine fact with a big dose of imagination. With *A Ghost in My Suitcase* I researched Chinese ghosthunters and ghosthunting equipment but the rest was invented. Breathing life into a new world, discovering its characters and exploring its landscape is one of the greatest pleasures I can imagine.

## Interview with Rosanne Hawke

***Rosanne Hawke grew up in rural Queensland and South Australia. As an adult, she has worked as a teacher in Australia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates. She was the recipient of an Asialink Residency in 2006, when she was the program's inaugural writer in residency in Pakistan.***

**Your stories are set in some very interesting places, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Australian desert. In fact, you grew up in some pretty remote towns and on properties in regional Australia, and later lived and worked in the Middle East and Pakistan. How has your writing been affected by these experiences? Would you say you have a strong interest in place or landscape?**

Yes I do have a strong sense of place, and connection with country. As a child I walked for distances by myself on our farm in central Queensland and did my homework in the paddock, by the creek or up the windmill. I found stories came easier to me in the paddock. That creativity could be connected with country is an interesting concept; maybe we need to take children out of the classroom more.

I was displaced a few times: when I was six to move to Queensland, when I was 14 to come back to South Australia, when I went to Pakistan with a young family, and coming back to Australia after ten years. This displacement and in some cases culture shock has turned up in many of my books – in *Re-entry*, *Mountain Wolf*, even *Marrying Ameera*. Most of my characters get displaced in some way near the beginning and then they work through it. In *Marrying Ameera*, Ameera thinks she is quite settled and then gets displaced when she is sent for a forced marriage in Azad Kashmir. The culture shock she feels echoes the culture shock I felt when I first went to Pakistan. Amazingly my worst culture shock was coming back to Australia, hence *Re-entry*.

Going to Pakistan after being brought up quite mono-culturally changed my life. It is where I started seriously writing. I think because I have lived in these places my writing is strongly embedded in place, even if it is set by the beach in Australia.

### **How do you research your books?**

I like to go to the place where the book is set. I also read print non-fiction and even fiction set in the place if I can. I search the internet for news articles, videos, and images. I watch documentaries and movies set in the place, listen to music from the place and basically immerse myself in the atmosphere while I am writing, and I write to the music that I think the character will listen to. I speak to people from the place if I can. Often this has to be done via email as with *Mountain Wolf*. Although I had been to Pakistan and



up the Karakorum Highway, I have not actually been in the tribal area of Kala Dhaka where the novel is set. So I corresponded with a man who had been an aidworker during the 2005 earthquake relief and he sent me images, reports and information. I could ask him questions about the place and my characters – Would they do this? Would the boy have a Lee Enfield rifle? How long would it take to walk down to the Indus? etc. – and he'd email me back. I always acknowledge all this type of help I receive.

**In some of your books, storytelling plays an important function. The characters will tell each other stories that they have memorised, folk tales generally, which not only entertain the audience, but also teach a lesson. For example, Khala tells stories in *Soraya the Storyteller*, and Taj's father tells stories in *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*. Can you talk a little about these stories within stories, or about the importance of storytelling in general? How do you seek out these stories?**

I believe storytelling is very important. It is through stories that ancient cultures kept their way of life alive. It is an ancient form of teaching and informing members of a group or culture. I also believe that if people know stories of their background they have a well formed sense of identity. Even going to a new place to live can be eased by learning the stories of that place. Understanding and belonging can come more quickly this way. I grew up being told stories by Mum and my sister. My mum used to get me to tell stories to keep me walking on trips to the farm next door. I was full of fairy stories, Pooh bear, folktales and bible stories. As I got older I never lost the fascination for folktales of other lands.

In *Soraya, the Storyteller*, I wanted to show how the stories of Soraya's past and culture will help keep her identity alive and keep her strong. I decided that if a Persian princess could change the heart of a king by telling him stories, maybe a twelve-year-old asylum seeker could too. A Year 10 reviewer once said she didn't realise a book could change her opinion about refugees like *Soraya, the Storyteller* had for her.

In *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*, I wanted to show the different cultures by their stories. The stories arose naturally in the story because the men had to sit around a campfire at night. What is the most natural thing to do when people have nothing else to do? They tell stories and sing songs.

I put the Pakistani love folktales in *Marrying Ameerah* because these were the stories her father told her and they show her cultural background.<sup>1</sup> I found many folktales combing through bookshops in Pakistan and sometimes I found them on the web. Many of the stories in *Soraya, the Storyteller*, came from *The Arabian Nights* because Soraya's father told her those. The story, "The Three Daughters



Figure 12 Rosanne Hawke's *Marrying Ameerah* (Angus and Robertson, 2010).

<sup>1</sup> Hawke writes in more detail about her use of folktales in *Marrying Ameerah* in her article "Crossing Borders: Writing *Marrying Ameerah*," which was published in *Write4Children* 3.1 (2011). It is available online at: [http://www.winchester.ac.uk/academicdepartments/EnglishCreativeWritingandAmericanStudies/publications/write4children/Documents/w4cnovember2011\(2\).pdf](http://www.winchester.ac.uk/academicdepartments/EnglishCreativeWritingandAmericanStudies/publications/write4children/Documents/w4cnovember2011(2).pdf)

and the Beast” was told to me by an Afghan girl. She said her grandfather told her this story and it has never been written down. It reminds me of a folktale I read as a child, showing the universality of so many of our stories.

**You spent close to ten years living in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. Jaime in *Jihad* also has ties to both Pakistan and Australia. At one point, Jaime thinks she might notice unrest in the marketplace more than a local does because she has been away in Australia; the implication is that she is more attentive to small shifts than someone who is truly at home. Do you think being a kind of permanent outsider has its advantages in this way, in that it perhaps makes one more observant?**

Yes, I think this is a good point. Writers don't always have to be an insider to write about a culture – a certain distance can be an advantage to notice those things people within a culture often take for granted. However, I do believe the writer needs to have respect for the culture he/she is writing about and do lots of research. Even though I write as an outsider, I have found that learning the language of the culture I am writing about gives some cultural insight. I have read books about the Middle East written by “outsiders” who have transposed a western character onto the Middle Eastern character in their book, e.g. one novel has a new arrival asylum seeker speaking Aussie slang and shows her Muslim family thanking the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) for their meal, something I have never heard a Muslim family do and I suspect it would be blasphemy for them to do so. I also found it difficult to not let my worldview sneak in under my character's. I found in my first draft of *Soraya the Storyteller* that I had written “[Arabic] is the language I will speak in heaven.” It is a Christian worldview to be certain of going to heaven but Muslims do not presume this, so I changed the sentence to

“[Arabic] is the language everyone will speak in heaven” (p. 65). Cultural point of view in a novel is just as tricky as any point of view – one phrase or wrong word and the character can be out of point of view, and the reader's suspension of disbelief is lost.

As I write in my article “Crossing Borders: Writing *Marrying Ameera*,” in the journal *Write4Children*, “Writing across a cultural border demands more than getting the setting or cultural details right. To write Ameera's anguish I needed to feel her pain in wanting to marry for love, while understanding this view isn't considered a Pakistani value. Even though I try to honestly record what I see, I was concerned lest my worldview try to sneak underneath Ameera's, but I decided any ‘mistakes’ Ameera makes could be blamed on her mother who isn't Muslim. Certainly Ameera's cousin Haider contributes her ‘Western-ness’ to her Christian mother and therefore a ‘kacha’ (faulty) upbringing. Above all, Ameera's story had to be paramount.”

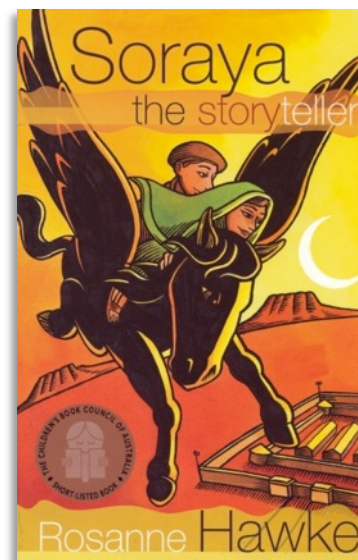


Figure 13 Hawke's *Soraya the Storyteller* (Lothian, 2004)

## Interview with Chris Cheng

*Chris Cheng is an Australian-Chinese author. He has worked as a teacher in schools and at Taronga Zoo. He has also worked as a children's book specialist for an Australian bookseller. His first book was The Eyespy Book of Night Creatures (1990), which described nocturnal Australian animals. Since then, he has also written works of historical fiction, including New Gold Mountain (2005), Seams of Gold (2007), and The Melting Pot (2007), all of which examine the historical experiences of Chinese Australians.*

**You obviously undertake extensive research for your historical novels as they rely on a range of factual evidence to help create an authentic story. How do you go about this research, and have your research methods changed over time? For example, are you turning more and more to online resources, and are the print resources that you have previously sourced in libraries becoming more readily available as digital texts? Do you get the same sense of history from the digital copies or do you prefer reading the original texts?**

For me the research method has not changed. I do a scan of the information that is out there in the ether using the internet and my web contact. I get a feel for some of the information that might exist but then for me I have to physically be part of the reveal. I have to uncover the information with my own hands. If there is an online reference to a document I want to feel and to read and to touch that document. The thought that the piece of paper that I am holding is hundreds of years old is phenomenal. It is the process that I love. It is the associated smells and the look of seeing the handwritten indentations into the paperwork that have been left there that can't be revealed in an online copy. Online searching is brilliant for gathering the scope of material out there and it most definitely makes the job of a historical fiction writer easier, but it only gives the overall view. It is a bit like looking at a map of a city from way up in the sky. You get to see the all-encompassing view, but to see the actual detail of who is walking the streets and to see what they look like you need to be there on the ground as close as possible. The beauty of the online searching platforms is that it is pulling all the available resources together in one viewing platform – my computer – but it doesn't change the fact that I have to read the documents and the letters myself. Of course, the online searching also does provide much more detail and historical information than originally envisaged. I had a good idea of some of the historical incidents, but after the online searching it revealed many more side events and happenings that were integral to the stories that I am telling – that would not have been in the final manuscript if not for the internet ... or which would have taken me a lot longer to discover.

**In an article titled “Writing Historical Fiction”<sup>2</sup> you say of your school experience that: “History to me was dead” (10). You later declare: “I came to love learning about history” (11). What factors or experiences led to this change of attitude? How do you “enliven” the experience of history for your readers?**

For me it was most definitely the fact that the dates and times and events that I was learning in school were of no relevance to me. What was the point of learning about when events took place? But once they are made relevant they became living and relatable history information pieces. For me, history needs to be relevant and needs to be told in a format that I can easily engage with – and for me that is the story of the history, the story of the “why,” the story of the “when,” and that I think is what I am trying to do in all of my historical fiction titles. I love writing the historical fiction but I love researching and finding out that information just as much. The revelation of the “why” is like a light being shone on an impossible problem that has now been made possible. I love the process of uncovering snippets of information that I have not heard before, for that then engages me to check the detail and dig deeper to see if this new information can be verified, and that engagement with the new information inevitably leads me on to new and more snippets of story that I have to discover and check. It is most definitely the story of the history that I so powerfully engage with!

For ages and ages, for generations, history has been told in story, it has been made real in story (often orally told) and that is what historical fiction, the literature is now doing. For me finding the artefacts and the documents made history real, I was finding my own way through the dates and the figures through the artefacts and the documents.

**Your book *Seams of Gold* (2007) is part of the Making Tracks series in which writers respond to an artefact from the National Museum of Australia’s collection. What made you choose the sewing basket from the available objects? Did having an historical artefact as the stimulus for your novel make the development of the storyline and the creation of a central character more difficult or easier?**

I was presented with a number of items of historical significance related to the Chinese and the gold mining time, but this basket for me seemed so different to other items of Chinese origin. What would a Chinese person be doing carrying such an item that has no visible linkage to gold mining? Of course, working with museum items is hugely wonderful. Museum items have provenance, where they came from, who they belonged to, etc., and all of this is so very powerful – it often tells much of the back-story, and so the author’s job is to tell that story in a convincing and relevant way, but for this item, very little was known ... so for a writer

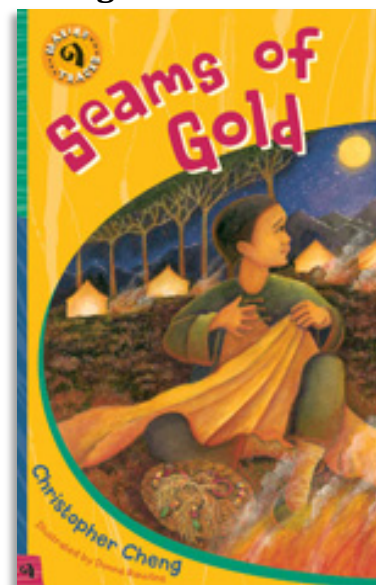


Figure 14 Chris Cheng's *Seams of Gold* (National Museum of Australia Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Cheng, Christopher. “Writing Historical Fiction.” *First Opinions, Second Reactions* 1.2 (2008): 10-13.

of historical fiction who likes to adhere to the facts this is *wonderful*. I could really let my story run! I was able to add much of the back story from other research that had revealed the immigrant story. Having an item of historical significance *with* detailed provenance can make the development of the storyline and the creation of a central character both difficult and easy. It is difficult because I like to adhere to the facts and want to maintain authenticity and if heaps of information (provenance provided by the curators) is there the fictional part of me as a writer finds it less easy (not more difficult) to write a fictional story. On the other hand, it is easy because so much of the story is there in the facts, in the provenance; I just need to find a voice to tell the story.

The object (in this case the basket) with little provenance allows the author opportunities to explore and engage and create “fiction” that might not have been there if more provenance was known. For example: would I have been so engaged if details of the owner of the basket were revealed? Probably not.

**In your historical fiction you present the perspectives of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese immigrants and highlight the injustices done to them both individually and collectively. In an article for *Newswrite*,<sup>1</sup> you have written about how you have examined the archival documents of early Chinese residents of Australia and seen sweat and blood stains, and smelled the glue that attached photographs to documents. Do encounters like this make you feel some sense of obligation to these people, even though you are writing fiction?**

Do I feel obliged to tell the story, maybe. I do know that the documents and artefacts were mightily powerful and integral in engaging me with the story that I wanted to tell. I really wanted to tell the story. And as a writer of historical fiction these documents and artefacts provided so many questions that I had to answer: How did they do this? Why did they do this? What was the reason? What was the result? Yes, I am a writer of fiction, but it is historical fiction. The story is based on facts; it is based on events and artefacts that are real. Also, being part Chinese myself, although from more recent immigrant times, it allowed me to question and explore and have a deeper personal relationship than others writers might have had. I hope that through the historical fiction that I write, people can have a deep sense, can feel, smell and experience the blood and the sweat that I discovered on the crinkly ivory and assorted coloured papers that I held in my gloved hands!

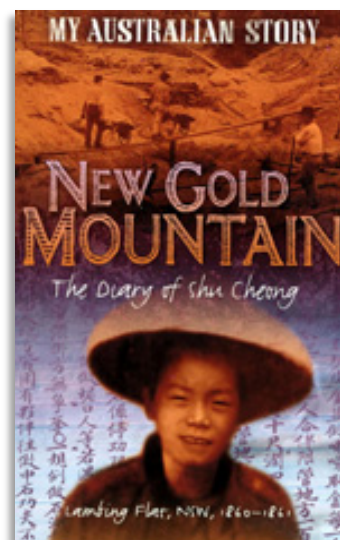


Figure 15 Chris Cheng's *New Gold Mountain* (Scholastic, 2005).

<sup>1</sup> Cheng, Chris. “History Isn’t Dead. History Lives!” *Newswrite: The New South Wales Writers’ Magazine* August-September 2009: 8.