



Australia Day

Melanie Cheng

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Australia Day is a collection of stories by debut author Melanie Cheng. The people she writes about are young, old, rich, poor, married, widowed, Chinese, Lebanese, Christian, Muslim. What they have in common—no matter where they come from—is the desire we all share to feel that we belong. The stories explore universal themes of love, loss, family and identity, while at the same time asking crucial questions about the possibility of human connection in a globalised world.

Melanie Cheng is an important new voice, offering a fresh perspective on contemporary Australia. Her effortless, unpretentious realism balances an insider's sensitivity and understanding with an outsider's clear-eyed objectivity, showing us a version of ourselves richer and more multifaceted than anything we've seen before.

Australia Day Details

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From Reader Review Australia Day for online ebook

Alison says

A couple of stories in this hit high highs – Ticket-holder number 5 was exquisite, floating lightly and packing a punch. Fracture takes you on a journey of complexity, with tension that holds and a growing dread that pays off memorably. Doughnuts and Allomother were also standouts for me – but many felt like near misses. I liked it, but I couldn't quite love it, there was something out of place. The earnestness with which a point was being made sometimes felt that it distorted the narrative, I could see the strings of author intent holding characters awkwardly in place. Not always a political point – even in Muse, the dysfunction of the character felt laboured, the story too keen to get us to a place of meaning; just as the Hotel California, Australia Day and Toy Town all felt burdened by a weight of explaining a series of characters experiences and viewpoints. Cheng remains a talent to watch, and I hope I'll find her future work slightly more even.

Carolyn Mck says

Melanie Chung's stories deconstruct the rhetoric of its epigraph: "There has never been a more exciting time to be an Australian". Her stories reveal an Australia of casual racism, of failures of compassion by those who work with people who are ill or marginalised. She shows a darker side of kindness as quotes from two stories illustrate:

"Leila presumed the Kellys had chosen her, with her Syrian background, as a means of alleviating some of this guilt." (Big Problems)

"But as she described her despair , Melissa heard something disturbing in her own voice - a childlike fascination or delight that came dangerously close to excitement. As if she were practising the tales she would tell her friends at the pub once she got back home to Australia." (Hotel Cambodia)

This would suggest that all these stories are negative but Cheng has too clear a vision for that. She sees tolerance and consideration too and the consolations of family and community. A doctor herself, she touches on issues of illness, pregnancy, hospitalisation and even surrogacy (in the brilliant story 'Allomother'). She develops her characters deftly in these stories, especially in the much longer 'Muse' about an elderly widower who seeks comfort in his art but finds redemption in unexpected places.

Cheng sets most of her stories in her home town of Melbourne. She offers a mirror that reflects today's Australian cities and the people who live in them. Highly recommended.

Tundra says

This is a thought provoking collection of short stories that places snapshots of Australia, and some of the vast array of people that call it home, under the microscope. While cleverly drawing attention to many issues it does not pass judgement but does make you reflect on how we all coexist within and beyond our diversity. I really enjoyed this book and the great skills of observation that Melanie Cheng carefully places on the page. Thanks to Text Publishing and Goodreads for my copy.

Josephine Quealy says

Look, I'll read future work by Melanie Cheng, but this collection is what I believe the professionals would call 'uneven'. Excellent insights into longing for connection and the casual racism running through Australian society over a series of stories that here and there were exquisite - Muse, Australia Day, Allomother, A Good and Pleasant Thing - and elsewhere were laboured and heavy-handed. I've seen some comments/criticism about the frequent medical settings and Cheng's background as a doctor. So what? She made it work. No one criticises Hemingway for all the fishing and wars.

Madeline O'Rourke says

I am not normally one for short story collections, but *Australia Day* proved why I should keep reading them anyway.

This collection stunningly portrays contemporary Australia, largely focused on ethnicity and race. Given the collection's name and content then, it only seemed natural to read it in late January and I'm glad I did. The stories don't necessarily directly challenge racism in modern Australia, but Cheng certainly gets the point across with an interesting subtlety. It makes for some thought-provoking parallels between her subtlety and the quiet racism that still pervades Australia.

As a white Australian, I'm never going to fully understand everything that comes across in this collection, but I was still blown away by the emotions and ideas that did come across. I very much enjoyed how Cheng chose to write these stories about such a variety of Australians, with diversity amongst gender, ethnicity, nationality, and even age. But importantly, they were all strongly united by their common theme and Cheng's wonderful writing. I really, really enjoyed this.

I don't have anything negative to say about the collection, but damn, Cheng really likes bougainvilleas. Common themes be damned, the constant mentions of bougainvilleas could have united all these stories.

Jaclyn Crupi says

This short story collection has blown me away. Cheng sketches her characters in ways that make them feel real and vital. This is exactly the kind of Australian fiction I get very excited about - a perspective on contemporary Australia that is new and nuanced and like nothing I have read before. More please.

Kate says

Focusing strongly on themes of identity, power balance and what it means to 'belong', Melanie Cheng's collection, *Australia Day*, provides snapshots of Australian suburban life from a variety of perspectives.

Cheng manages to deliver some powerful blows that caught me unaware. I stress the 'caught unaware' bit

because that's what happens with casual racism, isn't it? You're having a perfectly ordinary conversation with someone and they slip in something that is absolutely not right, and it catches you unaware. You're thinking 'Hang on...', and you turn the comment over and over in your mind, 'to be sure', but from every angle it's racist. And the conversation has moved on but you're left with a bad taste and you wish you'd said something in the moment. And that's how casual racism stays alive. And grows. And Cheng gently reminds us of that in her stories that examine life from the perspective of various cultural backgrounds –

She shows them how to operate the air conditioning before shuffling backwards to the door. Somehow, during this brief deferential dance, Raf slips Sukhon a tip. Kat is both impressed and a little revolted. (Clear Blue Skies)

But as she described her despair, Melissa heard something disturbing in her own voice – a childlike fascination or delight that came dangerously close to excitement. As if she were practising the tales she would tell her friends at the pub once she got back home to Australia. (Hotel Cambodia)

I loved the references to Melbourne, and Cheng's attention to detail, which firmly embedded her stories in suburbia –

Barry heated up a Lite n'Easy meal in the microwave and turned on the television. He watched MasterChef, which only made his food even less appetising than it already was. (Doughnuts)

3/5 A cohesive and thoughtful collection.

Jillian says

This is a book - and a talent- we very much need. It adds up to more than a collection of short stories. It is more like a huge Breughel canvas with the lives of a community playing out in endless interaction. Cheng consistently captures motivation, understands fear, longing, need, failure and acts of redemption.

What makes the collection so remarkable is that these understandings are applied to glimpses of lives across such a variety of ages, ethnicities and genders. Her observation is both clinical and empathetic, forcing the reader to connect the dots of some pretty basic shared psychology. It isn't always a pretty picture - but it's pretty consistent.

In an odd way it is reminiscent of Ruth Park - grounded in solid, memorable strugglers. Her break-through achievement, however, is in using the short story format to create a very big picture teeming with life that is both diverse and consistent.

Andrea says

I love disappearing into a novel and staying there for as long as I dare. However, short stories have their place! For quick visits into bookland, this is a satisfying trip. More contemporary Aussie short stories - but

with that multi-cultural difference. Well Done!

Shaun Mason says

What I really liked about these stories was the authenticity and subtle nuances within each of the characters. We all know people like them. Hell, we're all like them.

Text Publishing says

'Her [Cheng's] effortless, unpretentious realism balances and insider's sensitivity and understanding with an outsider's clear-eyed objectivity, showing us a version of ourselves richer and more multifaceted than anything we've seen before.'

Book Muse

'[Cheng's] individual characters suggest the ways in which we might move forward...Australia Day imagines a tomorrow where we can love our communities, our celebrations and our food, without leaving behind critical good taste.'

Sydney Review of Books

'Offering a fresh viewpoint on modern Australia, debut author Cheng is a significant new voice on the literary scene.'

PS News

'The stories are unpretentious, diverse, and a lot of the time, disconcertingly real. Cheng's characters are just as well realised; they live on in your head long after you've put her book down.'

Lifted Brow, Favourite Books of 2017

'This smart, engaging short story collection offers fresh perspectives on what it means to be Australian today. The stories also explore identity and belonging in a variety of other ways, delving into family, love, class and education. Big themes aside, every story is beautifully written and a total pleasure to read.'

Emily Maguire, Australian Women's Weekly

'This is a theme that Cheng's stories revisit again and again. All of her characters—a diverse cast of difference races and faiths—are searching for connection or a sense of belonging, and coming up short. Despite its title the focus of this collection is not explicitly on that increasingly controversial public holiday. Rather, it is on the struggles, internal and external, that occur when people from different backgrounds meet by chance or are brought together...Australia Day is a bittersweet, beautifully crafted collection that will be much admired by fans of Cate Kennedy and Tony Birch.'

Books+Publishing

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

Christos Tsiolkas

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

Alice Pung

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

Jennifer Down

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

Michelle Wright

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

Ranjana Srivastava

'A bittersweet, beautifully crafted collection.'

Books + Publishing

'Australia Day is an absorbing panorama of contemporary Australia... These are 14 powerfully perceptive stories, written with love, humour, realism, and a distinct edginess. While the terrain covered might be familiar, Cheng's take on our treasured multiculturalism feels fresh... It's necessary reading, not only because it's a microcosm of who we are, but because each story is a gem, and a joy to behold.'

Simon McDonald

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

Saturday Paper

'A wonderful feat of storytelling... Melanie Cheng is an exciting new writer.'

Readings

'A sumptuous collection of fourteen short stories, which are disparate but with modern Australia or Australians at their heart, exploring issues of racism, infidelity, grief, parenthood, children and ageing. Despite the brevity of some of these stories (one is just eight pages), they are heartfelt and Melbourne-based Cheng paints the characters beautifully.'

Herald Sun

'A panorama of contemporary multicultural Australia that explores each and everyone's desire to belong.'

Book Bonding

'A diverse, captivating collection of short stories.'

Better Read Than Dead

'The happy surprise of Cheng's work as a collection lies in her resolute grasp of the absolute normalcy of a culture that not so many years ago was divided and dually suspicious. The census gives us the facts but it takes fiction to make reality three-dimensional.'

Sydney Morning Herald

'The author's empathetic eye and easy facility with dialogue make the anthology a strong debut, with the longer stories in particular offering breadth and depth... It feels like Cheng has taken a wide sample from the census to craft this inclusive portrait of contemporary Australia.'

Big Issue

'A stunning debut that takes its place among Australian short story greats.'

AU Review

'Cheng's work is polished and affecting. Australia Day is that thing we all chase: a complex, engaging and timely read.'

Lifted Brow

'Cheng paints a holistic snapshot of Australian life, with the result being a collection of stories that are simultaneously cynical and hopeful... The ambiguity inherent in labelling something "Australian" is also manifest in Cheng's characters, prompting the reader to interrogate their own definition of what it means to be Australian.'

Kill Your Darlings

'Melanie Cheng writes prose that gets straight to the heart of the matter and tells it how it is... The more I sit here and reflect on each story in this collection, the stronger and more powerful they become.'

Sam Still Reading

'Melanie Cheng's voice is strong, compassionate and embracing in these 14 stories that reflect the diversity of Australians and the starkness of human frailty. The recurring theme in all these stories is the ability to reform lives that, at first, might seem to be shattered beyond repair.'

Good Reading, four stars

'The different cultures, the intriguing characters all left me wanting more. I'd love to see some longer fiction from Melanie Cheng in the future but I'll happily accept anything and everything she writes. A fantastic talent who has nailed the art of the short story.'

Sam Still Reading

'Wonderful.'

Christos Tsiolkas, Sydney Morning Herald's Year in Reading

Ellen says

A distinctive voice and a varied collection. Standouts were 'Fracture', 'Muse' and 'A Good and Pleasant Thing', where the writing was on song and the stories striking. Other snippets felt short, surprisingly so, as sentences ceased and immersion ended with a suddenness that startled.

Paul Lockman says

Having just read Norwegian by Night this book was a slight let down for me. I realise this is totally unfair to the author but it does happen. You read what you think is a brilliant book, the quality of the writing

outstanding, and the next book you read falls a bit flat. Unfortunately I think this is what happened with me and Australia Day. I do think Melanie Cheng has talent and I will definitely read something else of hers. There was an honesty and realism to most of the stories and if you aren't Australian it will give you a reasonable insight into Australian culture, especially that of living in one of the larger 'multicultural' cities. Short stories can always be a bit hit and miss, with 14 stories working out to an average of 15-20 pages each, I felt most of the themes and characters were under-developed. The author is also a doctor so it's understandable that health and medical issues would be over-represented. I look forward to Melanie Cheng expanding her repertoire.

Scott says

4.5 stars. I won this anthology of short stories in a Goodreads giveaway thanks to the generosity of the publishers.

The writing is engaging and the book's strength is in its diverse characters going about their daily lives. These stories, although not always the greatest, are great in their portrayal of everyday Aussies in the best, and worst, times of their lives.

Most stories are short and sweet, leaving the reader wanting more, but happy enough to move onto the next course.

Definitely recommended reading.

Michael Livingston says

A promising debut collection, from an interesting new voice in Australian fiction. Cheng writes about racial issues in Australia well and is part of a (hopefully growing) diversification of Australian literature.
