



Teachers' Notes
Written by Dr Pam MacIntyre

Little Paradise by Gabrielle Wang

Often we speak of Australia as being a multicultural community and of the need to tell our own stories on our pages, our stages and our screens. Beyond the enjoyment of the story, Gabrielle Wang's new novel captures a strong sense of just one pocket of that multicultural community whilst also offering us an opportunity to see that the act of 'telling our own stories' can also be an act of telling the stories of the world.

Chris Thompson in *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* 18 (1) p.13.

Historical Background: The years from 1940 to 1949 are the span of this novel, but its focus is one that probably not many young Australians are aware of, particularly the Japanese occupation of China and the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists after World War 2. Teachers might like to fill in this context before the book is read. Alternatively, particular events in the novel could be researched as the book is read and interest stimulated.

Summary

*Dressing the dead
Treasure not wed
Lost on the sea
To fortune you'll flee*

These are the words carved onto an oracle bone by a soothsayer to whom the fourteen-year-old protagonist is taken by her mother, determined to change her name from Lei-An to Mirabel, much against the wishes of her mother. For Mama, tradition is fundamental, and challenging destiny does not forebode well for her daughter.

The setting is Melbourne and the multicultural suburb of Carlton during the early years of the Second World War. Lei An's changing of her name to Mirabel signals her determination to live her own life, despite coming from a traditional Chinese family.

This is an extraordinary love story based on the life of the author's parents – her mother's photograph illustrates the cover, and her mother's drawings as a fourteen year old decorate the endpapers. Most of all, it is the story of that extraordinary young woman, her courage and strength of character. It is also a vivid picture of a Chinese family in Australia during the Second World War, and then of a young family in Shanghai during the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists. Rich, rewarding, beautifully constructed and written, it is a story of our past that is a story for our times.

Structure

Prologue

The opening visit to the soothsayer vividly evokes another time and culture. The careful choice of language is one of the pleasures of reading this book and this opening is full of sights, sounds, smells and touch.

Part One

Read the poetry at the beginning of each section and discuss interpretations and any suggestions to what this section might be about.

Mirabel's life at home with Mama, Papa, Lola and Jimmy, with her friend at school, Rose, and pen-friend, Eva, in Adelaide, and her passion and talent for drawing and design is brought to life, overshadowed by war: Part One finishes with *'And the dark clouds gathered'*.

Part Two

Moves ahead to 1944. Mirabel's cousin Margo's husband, Harry, is back from the war. He has nightmares and is changed. Today we know it as post-traumatic stress syndrome. Mirabel, now seventeen, begins work as a cartographer, and finds companionship and kindred spirits as many of the mapmakers are artists. She first sees JJ; he later rescues her from drunken American soldiers and then appears in her home. They are clearly in love. JJ has to return to China and Mirabel finds out about her mother's identity.

Part Three

It is now 1945 and this section opens with a newspaper report of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, signaling the end of the war. Mirabel discovers she is pregnant. She is afraid of the effect of this shame on her family and plans an abortion, but does not go through with it. She tells her parents and bears her father's anger and her mother's telling her she has committed a sin. She is confined to the house and has to leave her job. Her father says she is to give up the baby when it is born. Auntie May suggests she should run away to Adelaide to have the baby, and so she does, feeling that her family has been left behind and that she is alone. Her son, Bao Bao is born in March 1946. Mirabel decides to go to China to find JJ.

Part Four

This section is set in China, mainly Shanghai, from early 1947. En route, Mirabel had met a young English couple, Chrissy and Edward, traveled through the islands of Japan and seen first-hand some residue of the terrible war on ordinary people.

Mirabel stays in Shanghai with the Hartmanns, Rose's uncle and family, looking for JJ and his brother. This is during the time of the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communists, with the government executing communist sympathisers.

Eventually, Mirabel meets JJ's brother, Jin Yu, and finds out that JJ is only four hours away. She determines to go to him. Civil strife escalates and all their friends leave, until JJ and Mirabel too must escape.

Symbolism

A white cat appears continually in the story, beginning on page 1 and appearing again on pages 50 and 52. Why does Mirabel think there is something familiar about it? On page 58 she describes a water colour painting she has done of it. It appears on pages 205 and 206. Mirabel wonders whether the oracle bone is connected to it somehow. What do you think? On page 248 she sees a white cat again at the boat office, and later on page 283 sees it run under a truck full of soldiers, but escape unharmed. Finally, on page 314 the soothsayer's white cat runs away.

- What do you think is the place of the white cat in the story? Could it be similar to a 'witch's familiar' – an animal helper?
- What happens in Mirabel's life each time she sees the cat? Discuss the significance of the oracle bone (p14) and what it signifies at the beginning and the end of the story.

Characters

Mirabel – thirteen when the story opens. She is third generation Chinese-Australian. Her grandfather came to Australia during the gold rushes. She takes care of the family because her mother is ill and sometimes institutionalised, and her older sister, Lola, is selfish and preoccupied with her own life. Mirabel longs to paint but feels the pressure of duty. She also loves to design and make clothes, and has had this talent from a young age. She demonstrates great strength of character and purpose. For instance, after the birth of her son she knows she will provide for her child somehow. She is the one in her family to confront the man who has been blackmailing the family about her mother's identity.

- p187 Rose says of Mirabel: '*You are brave... The bravest person I know*'. Do you agree? In what way is she brave?
- p254-5 She thinks to herself that she '*was an altogether different person to the shy Melbourne schoolgirl she once had been... Gone too, was the Mirabel who had left Shanghai just a few hours earlier*'. What

has happened in her life that has changed her, and how is she different?

Find examples of her strength of purpose and presence of mind, such as on page 297 when she strikes Mr. Tan and then retaining her composure on pages 298-301 in the face of the government officials.

- Do you think it is her need to protect Bao Bao that gives her such strength? How do people find such strength in times of danger and crisis? Share examples from students' lives, or those they are aware of in current times – perhaps Jessica Watson.

Rose – new girl at school. She is blond and beautiful and spirited. Her family, being Jewish, has had to flee from persecution in Vienna. She and Mirabel find their family strictures are something they have in common. She stays at school when Mirabel leaves, and studies to be a lawyer.

Eva – Mirabel's pen friend in Adelaide. She and her husband, Aubrey, take Mirabel in when she has the baby.

Jimmy – Mirabel's much-loved younger brother.

Lola – Mirabel's nineteen-year-old sister, who, in the opening pages of the story has an American boyfriend, a *'foreign devil'* according to her mother who wants to forbid Lola from seeing him. Her life revolves around seeing young men.

Mama – is moody, and possibly manic depressive. She has spent time away from the family getting well. She never speaks of her life before coming to Australia.

On page 31, when she is in the rest home, she says to Mirabel that she is not who Mirabel thinks she is. When she eventually tells the story it explains much about her, and allows Mirabel to help her heal.

Father – a man with prestige and position in the Chinese community in Melbourne. He takes a very hard line towards Mirabel and her baby.

Great Auntie May – is eighty years old and lives in an old mansion divided up into flats. The community of it appeals to her – like a Chinese village. She has never learned to read or write so Mirabel reads the newspaper to her. She allows JJ and Mirabel to meet at her house – and doesn't tell.

Jin Jing – (JJ) twenty-one-years old when he meets Mirabel. He was born to a poor family in a village outside Shanghai. He comes to Australia in a liaison role between the governments of Australia, USA and China. He tells his story of educating himself on page 101. After the end of the war he works reconstructing villages until he is reunited with Mirabel and Bao Bao.

Jin Yu is JJ's younger brother whom Mirabel meets in Shanghai when he is nineteen. He supports the Communists against the Nationalists, a dangerous position in 1947.

He is betrayed, tortured and shot.

Hartmann family in Shanghai – Rachel, Max and two little girls. Their friend, Stefan, is another Jewish refugee living in Shanghai, but not in the expatriate French Concession.

Plot

This is a rich, complex story that crosses continents and spans conflicts and different social situations. Below are significant elements of the story, but students might like to keep note of what they find important and resonant in the unraveling of the narrative. This could be kept on a class wiki or blog and added to and altered as more is revealed.

- Mirabel has to deliver the package with money it. Speculate on what this might be about – blackmail of some sort?
- p55 Mirabel sees the Chinese soldiers for the first time.
- p 55 Margo's husband is injured flying for the RAAF. Students might like to find out about the Chinese Australians who fought in the Second World War.
- p59 Mirabel's last day at school. Rose stays on to do Matriculation.
- p63 End of part 1 '*and the dark clouds gathered*'. This suggests a sense of foreboding against the promise of young possibility. Discuss what the students think might be ahead for Mirabel and for Australia.
- p105 Rose reveals her Jewish relatives have fled from Vienna to Shanghai. It is a fascinating part of the history of Shanghai and students might be interested in reading or researching about this rich history of Jews in China. Some had to live in a ghetto called the Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees, in the Hongkou District. Some were Russians who had fled the Revolution in the early twentieth century and who moved from Harbin. In the early 1940s there were over 30,000 Jews who had fled the Holocaust in Europe. Shanghai was a melting pot with newspapers published in English, Chinese, French, Russian, Polish, Italian, Hebrew and Japanese. Did many come to Australia after the Communists took over mainland China?
- p126 JJ returns to China.
- p130 Mama's secret.
- p191 Great Auntie May encourages Mirabel to have the baby: she says '*This baby was meant to be*'. What might that mean, and how would Auntie May know this? Invite students to think about moments in their lives and their families' lives where things 'were meant to be.'
- p165 Mama supports Mirabel, and she and Bao Bao come back to Melbourne. Mirabel works at the Victoria Market at her father's stall.
- p169 Frank Chen visits with news of JJ – because he fought with the Kuomintang the Communists are after him.

- p187 Mirabel's actions have freed her mother from her past, and now she feels she can go to China to reunite with JJ.
- p229 Mirabel spends months in Shanghai without finding JJ. But she never gives up. It would have been easy for her to return to her family. What gives her such determination?
- p248-50 She takes a boat to his village without telling Rachel and Max. The boat is stopped by Kuomintang soldiers looking for communists and she witnesses a terrible shooting of some of her young fellow passengers by callous soldiers.
- p254 This shocking act is followed by the kindness of a local, who takes her to San Chang. What does this suggest about the differences between officials and ordinary people? Is this still part of society? Invite students to share experiences of places they have visited and encounters with local people, and then what sort of government the country has. Does the government of Australia and its attitudes and philosophy reflect their own?
- p260 Mirabel and JJ move to Shanghai and squat in an old mansion along with other families, including an unpleasant neighbour, Mr. Tan. There is no running water or heating, but Mirabel has a clerical job on the Bund and JJ starts a successful business making underwear from silk parachutes.
- p287 After Jin Yu is shot, it is not safe for them in Shanghai – they might be considered to be communists too. JJ leaves for his village and Mirabel is alone in Shanghai, ready to flee on his return.
- p303 They leave China.

Ideas

Below are some ideas taken from the story that are worth discussing both in terms of the story and for their wider resonances.

- *'If you don't know history then you don't why things happen to you.'*
- p12 *'Everyone can draw...It's just that school knocks it out of you so you end up thinking you can't.'*
- p14 *'You know, I've learnt that if you want to change a person's way of thinking, you need to find something you have in common.'*
- p17 *'Everyone should have a place they escape to, a paradise of their own'*. Discuss why the book is called *Little Paradise*. Write or draw your personal paradise.
- p314 The Epilogue and the patterns of destiny *'to help people see the patterns that bind them'*. What are the patterns for Mirabel? What are they in your life?

War

The backdrop of the story is the Second World War – and its effects on everyday life in Australia, rather than on battles. Woven into this are historical events that might be new to students. Some might like to research/read further.

- p16 and page 20: What all primary school children had to carry in case of an air raid.
- p23 Practice air-raid sirens.
- p29 Only English is allowed to be spoken on the phone and Mama only speaks Chinese. Names of the railway stations have been taken down.
- p32 The effect of American soldiers in Melbourne, such as the jitterbug.
- p34 Mirabel is aware of the war in China, and the Japanese atrocities, but not so aware of the war in Europe. Would this be true for Rose?
- p72 The trenches dug in case of air raids; the Town Hall is sandbagged.
- p166 The wounded return, many who had been prisoners-of-war.
- p171 The civil war is still going in China, with the US supporting Chiang Kai-shek.
- p198 Post-war Japan under the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces.
- p199-200 Mirabel sees the devastation of Hiroshima and the suffering mitigates her feelings towards the Japanese who had performed horrors against the Chinese. She gives Bao Bao's jacket to a young mother scavenging in the ruins. This challenges her and us, to see war on a personal scale – again the differences between officialdom and ordinary people.
- p264 DDT is used to get rid of mosquitoes and therefore malaria in the jungle. It was seen then as a scientific boon – what do we know about it now?

China

Post world war China is a land of extremes – the comfort of the expatriate population living in the International Settlement and French Concession in Shanghai contrasts starkly with the war and famine-ravaged villages in the countryside. Much of this is worth close scrutiny and discussion and might provide new information to students about British and European colonialism.

- p212 Mirabel witnesses brutality towards poor people. A man wants to buy Bao Bao, and her case containing everything precious is stolen, but fortuitously she retrieves it.
- p206 The metropolis of Shanghai – its wealth and poverty.
- p208 Mirabel arrives in the French Concession.
- p217 Shanghai is a meeting place of people from all over the world.
- p223 History of opium and the Opium wars.
- pp224-225 Descriptions of poverty and death in a large city.
- p232 The cultural life of Shanghai.
- p235 Beautiful, peaceful Shanghai with the elderly men playing Chinese chess in the park, the trees in flower and hung with bird cages.
- p237 The affluent, snobbish French café.
- p239 This is contrasted with the life in the villages devastated by war and famine – people eating bark.
- p249 Mirabel's journey in the countryside – up the Yangtze and then a tributary.

- p256 Hospitality of her mother-in-law, including putting on a feast.
- p270 The civil unrest continues, and refugees from the countryside pour into Shanghai. There is rampant inflation, 770,000 Chinese dollars to one American dollar.

Secrets

Pp132 Mama reveals her secret past and why money is paid to the Chens for over twenty years. Now do you understand her better? Imagine what it would be like to give up your identity and live as someone else – someone you loved and admired – keeping it secret and being blackmailed for it.

- Write how Mama feels now she has unburdened herself – a poetic form might be most appropriate here. The poetry at the beginning of each section could be used as inspiration – that distillation of emotion and experience.

Love story

- p103 Mirabel reveals that her father won't approve of her love affair with a soldier.
- The war will end and they will be separated. Mirabel's love is so strong that she has to defy her father and tradition.
- p119 Mirabel and JJ travel to Tasmania for a week together.
- p123 Mirabel determines to fight for their future.
- p125 Mother tells Mirabel she knows she loves JJ. Even though she is not well, she is more sensitive to those around her than her husband. Do you get the sense that she will support Mirabel now?
- Is it the strength of her love for JJ that allows Mirabel, a young unmarried woman with a baby, to travel to a country in conflict, not even knowing where she will find him?

Think of other great love stories, such as Romeo and Juliet, Cleopatra and Mark Antony, Guinevere and Lancelot, Elizabeth Bennett and Darcy, Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester, Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky and perhaps Bella and Edward.

- Set up a wiki with these love stories and vote for the greatest one, giving reasons. Where would Mirabel and JJ come? Do we think the tragic ones are the greatest or those that triumph? Consider what those couples went through, what they sacrificed for their love.

Different times/different values

There are many striking differences between Melbourne forty years ago and now, and students will enjoy identifying those that resonate with them. Here are some to begin to talk about how society and its values and mores have changed.

- p11 The boys' and girls' areas of the school ground are separated by a high fence and the girls are not allowed to talk to the boys.
- p20 The teacher organises a boxing match to solve differences.

- p40 Great Auntie May's camera is a Box Brownie. Find one on the web, or perhaps in the cupboard at home.
- p109 Rheumatic fever: and a new drug penicillin. We now take antibiotics for granted.
- pp190-1 Sailing from Station Pier and throwing streamers – tradition – before widespread air travel.

Racism

Although Mirabel is born in Australia and her forbears came out during the Gold Rushes, she encounters various kinds of racism, some of it unthinking.

- p16 *'How long have you been in Australia?'* the teacher asks. Mirabel is third generation Australian-Chinese.
- Does this still happen today? For instance, Shaun Tan recalls being asked 'Where are you from?' When he answered 'Here', the next question was 'Where are your parents from?' Are we really multicultural – then, now?
- p19 Jimmy is called a *'ching chong'*.
- p34 Mirabel wants to go to China – *'Sometimes I think I belong there more than I do here. At least I'd look like everyone else and not be called a foreigner.'*
- p74 Mirabel is accosted by drunken American soldiers; one calls her a *'slant-eyed slut'*.
- P244-5 It is hard to accept the awful snobbish English couple who are patently rude and extremely racist to Mirabel. Her friends defend her by saying *'she is one of us'* and that she has good English. Is this just as racist? Mirabel gives as good as she gets.
- p272 White Australia Policy means JJ can't get a visa to come to Australia. What do you know about this policy and when was it finally abolished?

Chinese culture and values

We are given insights into this particular Chinese family and its milieu.

- p21 *'Colour, background and status – in that order were the only things that mattered.'* Lola's parents object to her American soldier.
- p24 Mirabel enjoys cooking: p.25 seaweed and egg drop soup
- p41 Great Auntie May describes the old practice of foot binding.
- p44 Mirabel's father provides a place for the old men from his local area in China.
- p44 Sharing the water pipe.
- p56 Wise sayings: *'When a peach is ready to be picked, it is sweet and juicy. Picked too early, it is bitter and hard. Timing is everything.'* Explode out various interpretations of this. Are there similar favourite sayings in the students' families? Share them and why they persist and why we enjoy keeping them alive.
- p86 The meal for the visiting soldiers: eight dishes and a soup. Mirabel thinks it is too much food, but the Chinese custom is that to honour

guests you must provide a banquet. Share how other communities/families honour guests.

- Food is an important feature of the story, not only honouring guests but for bonding, family and friends, and preserving and celebrating culture. Share what are important foods in the lives and families of students.
- p96 JJ says '*Everyone knows their place, and what they should do. This is what makes society run smoothly.*' Discuss in terms of his life. Do the events in the book challenge or confirm this? Discuss its application to contemporary society.
- p131 Dowry – each piece has symbolic value.
- p144 The house for the abortion is four *si* – sound of death – a bad luck number.

Melbourne

The author has evoked a particular setting of Melbourne in the 1940s. Those who live in the city will enjoy making comparisons – perhaps even those who have only visited will too.

- p41 Auntie May learns Italian from a neighbour in an inner city area of many races and nationalities. There are books by Arnold Zable - *Scraps of Heaven* and Jean Holkner (*Taking the Chook* – this time from the point of the Jewish community) that evoke the post war era in Carlton.
- p43 The Queen Victoria Market – built on the site of the old Melbourne cemetery. (Currently, the City Council is looking at gentrifying it. For a picture of it even earlier read *Market Blues* by Kirsty Murray)
- p46-47 Mirabel stumbles into the laneways and brothels of the city.
- p50 A twenty-first birthday celebration is held in Celestial Avenue Chinatown. Does it still exist?
- p59 Mirabel and Rose go to the Botanical Gardens and sit by the ornamental lake. Is it still there?
- pp72-3 Chinatown.
- p73 Her Majesty's Theatre.
- p89 Hilliers Soda Fountain on Collins Street – Rose and Mirabel drink lime spiders.
- p95 St Kilda Road and the Victoria Barracks – what do those buildings house now?
- p98 JJ and Mirabel go to Luna Park. What is still there? Ghost Train, Big Dipper, river caves etc?
- p107-8 Mirabel waits for JJ on Princes Bridge and describes a girl passing her. Write or draw that scene now. Would the lamps still be there? Describe or draw a contemporary girl going past.

For a picture of Melbourne during war time, watch the Melbourne episode of *The Pacific*. It is from an American perspective but depicts the excitement felt by Australians when American soldiers were visiting.

Politics and history

In Australia

- p33 Mirabel's father belongs to the Kuomintang Party. What do you know about it? Does it still exist? What happened to the Nationalists?
- p73 Chiang Kai-shek was the President of China
- p81 The background is the growth of the Communists in China
- p83 Captain Shen and Lieutenant Lin have been sent to liaise with General MacArthur. How much do you know about the cooperation between the Chinese and the Allies in World War 2? Why do you think that perhaps this is not well-known?

In China

- p86 Famine, starvation, civil war between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung.
- p101 JJ says his brother tells him that the Communists are honest, sincere – and they have hope and vision for a better China. Mirabel is shocked as her family supports the government of Chiang Kai Shek.
- p102 JJ has schoolmates sent as spies behind enemy lines who have been killed by the Japanese.
- p277-8 Jin Yu urges JJ to go to a Communist meeting. He describes a corrupt and brutal Nationalist government, and his Communist ideals. Did his ideal society come to fruition?
- Then there is the personal aspect that Mirabel encounters: on page 282 she sees the *'death parade'* – trucks full of condemned men paraded around the town before they are executed in a park.

Refugees

This was a time of great upheaval for many people across the world and scores of people were forced to become refugees, escaping war and/or persecution in their homelands, like the Hartmanns and then Mirabel and JJ.

- What makes a refugee? (Consider that there may be refugees in your class before you pursue this)
- When you think of a 'refugee' what do you imagine?
- What if you were a refugee?
- If you had to escape quickly with very few possessions what would you take? How would you survive – feed yourself for example?

Ideas

- p100 *'I believe you should take control of your own life'* says JJ. Discuss this in terms of the book and for its wider philosophical resonances.
- p179 The value of the role that beauty can play in people's lives: *'for years she had been told that the dresses she created changed people's lives, enhanced their natural beauty, reached deep inside their*

heart and soul and brought forth qualities never seen before.' Discuss this and why it might be so. Have students ever experienced this – for instance being part of a wedding or perhaps a bride transformed? The year 10 formal?

- p180 Description of the artistic impulse.
- Pages 185-5 the results – the *dressing the dead*. This is a powerful moment in the book. How is it healing for Mirabel's mother?

Design

One of the great pleasures of reading the book is the description of the lovely clothes that Mirabel designs and makes with loving care and thought for the person who is going to wear them.

- Draw or make the various dresses and qi pao, such as her wedding dress, the dress for her mother, etc.
- Design or find photographs of dresses that you think bring out the inner person for people close to you.
- Design was Mirabel's passion. What is your passion?

Language

There is much pleasure in the carefully controlled and evocative language in this book that builds strong pictures of its various locales. Below are a few examples, and students could be encouraged to mark or note examples that resonate with them.

Similes:

- p4 '*comb marks clean as furrows in a field of rich earth*'.
- p50 '*the moon a dusky yellow orb like a Chinese lantern*'.

Personification:

- p4 '*Flames like yellow tongues licked the scented air*'.

Also, there are different languages spoken by the characters, such as German, Cantonese, Shanghainese, Mandarin, Yiddish etc.

Discuss or do a class demographic of who speaks more than language and what are those languages.

- What are the benefits of speaking more than one language?
- Are there any phrases, words, sayings that English doesn't have and that are impossible to translate?
- Put these on a class wiki to be added to.

Related reading

What was the war like grandma? by Rachel Tonkin

Bye, Beautiful Julia Lawrinson

Mao's Last Dancer by Li Cunxin

Growing up Asian in Australia edited by Alice Pung

Unpolished Gem by Alice Pung

Home and Away by John Marsden & Matt Ottley

Film: Shanghai Ghetto (2002)

<http://aso.gov.au/titles/features/home-song-stories/clip2/>

Interview with Mabel Wang, Gabrielle's mother as she talks about the early years.

<http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/library/media/Video/id/1142.Mabel-Wang-about-her-early-years-with-her-husband-David-Wang>

Reunion (1998) <http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/reunion/>

Three short relevant excerpts are available at this site.

This is a documentary made about Gabrielle Wang's family, including her parents whose lives inspired *Little Paradise*. Students can then get a glimpse of what happened to 'Mirabel', 'JJ' and 'Bao Bao' (i.e. their real life inspirations) after the end of the story. There are accompanying Teachers Notes.

Websites

<http://www.gluckman.com/ShanghaiJewsChina.html>

www.gabriellewang.com