

The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling

By Wai Chim

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Paperback

Recommended for 12-16-year-olds

Summary

Anna Chiu has her hands pretty full looking after her brother and sister and helping out at her dad's restaurant, all while her mum stays in bed. Dad's new delivery boy, Rory, is a welcome distraction and even though she knows that things aren't right at home, she's starting to feel like she could just be a normal teen.

But when Mum finally gets out of bed, things go from bad to worse. And as Mum's condition worsens, Anna and her family question everything they understand about themselves and each other.



This book, in addition to exploring mental illness and its impact on relationships, also looks at the Chinese-Australian diaspora and more complex race relationships. It looks at first love, sibling relationships and mother-daughter relationships. It also deals with the question of life after high school and how to navigate choices and expectations within the education system.

Use in the curriculum

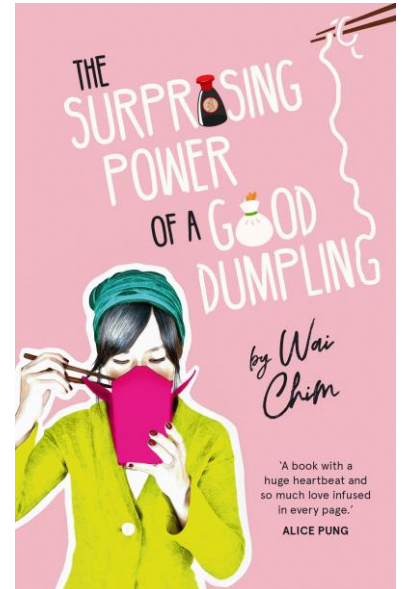
Suitable for use in Year 9, 10 and 11 English classrooms – *teachers should be aware that mental illness of a parent is a significant theme.*

Addresses the general capabilities of Literacy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding and Intercultural Understanding.

Appropriate as an 'Own Voices' narrative – author is Chinese-Australian.

The themes of this novel will strike a note with many students who are first- or second-generation migrants.

School, and career advice from teachers, is a real part of the characters' lives.



Themes

- family
- mental health
- taboos
- responsibility
- second generation Australians
- food
- school

Discussion questions

1) The novel is written from Anna's point of view, with the exception of Ma's chapters at the opening and closing of the story.

- Why do you think Wai Chim chose Mrs Chiu's voice at these points? Did it make you feel more sympathy for Mrs Chiu after reading her inner thoughts and torments?
- How might you have felt about her if her voice had not been included in the book?

2) Just as Anna searches for 'signs' to gauge her mother's mental state, there are a lot of clues in the first chapter that tell us about the personalities of Anna and her sister, Lily.

- Find two traits for each character and match this trait with the 'clue' in the chapter.

3) 'The shadows of the leaves on the wall bend to the right ... *Or maybe they're just freaking leaves.*' (pp. 3-5)

- Find two examples of the following literary devices in the extract:
 - Simile
 - Metaphor
 - Personification
 - Imagery

4) Both Miss Kennedy, Anna's pathways advisor, and Miss Holloway, Michael's primary school librarian, want the best for their students, but take very different approaches to working with individual personalities.

- How would you describe these approaches and which do you think is the more valid?
- What more general point do you think Wai Chim might be making about the K-Year 12 education system in Australia?
- Does your own experience of school support this view?

5) Why do you think Wai Chim chose *Macbeth* as the play that Anna is studying (and that Rory feels so passionately about)?

6) 'It's an annoying nickname. When we first moved to Ashfield, kids at school used to call me that, because I never went to Chinese school,' I explain. 'Banana is yellow on the outside, white on the inside. Like "Twinkie" in America ... Thankfully, Rory doesn't ask any more questions. For now.' [pp. 130-131]

Racism is a major theme in *The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling* and is depicted as existing within cultural groups, as well as between cultural groups.

- Discuss in relation to how Anna is treated by ethnic Chinese kids when she arrived in Ashfield, her own parents' views about 'mainland' Chinese people and non-Chinese Australians, as well as the racism (microaggression versus overt) she experiences from non-Chinese Australians.

7) Why do you think Anna's father ignores his wife's illness throughout much of the novel? Do you think his attitude is indicative of our broader society's attitude to mental health?

8) 'I'll never cease to be amazed by the surprising power of a good dumpling.' (p. 373)

Wai Chim could have ended her story at this 'happy ending' point in the novel but chose to continue the story and have Anna's mother relapse. Why do you think she chose to do this, and do you think it makes the novel stronger?

9) Where do you stand on the #OwnVoices issue? Do you think an author's identity and/or experiences are important factors when considering the validity of a book? What are the pros and cons of the #OwnVoices movement? There are many articles on the internet about this issue but these are a good starting point:

<http://www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/>

<https://www.readbrightly.com/why-we-need-diverse-authors-in-kids-ya-lit/>

<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/04/228847/own-voices-movement-ya-literature-impact>

Author's inspiration/comments etc

'The inspiration behind *The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling* is definitely personal experiences. This is probably the most honest book that I have ever written – also the most difficult. It's written for the real life "Anna" – young Asian-American/Australians who might have experiences at home that they don't have the language to articulate. But I think it speaks to a wider audience than even this, as so many of us have some contact or personal relationships with mental illness.

'Our ability to speak to mental illness is so limited – it's met with so much fear, misunderstanding and misrepresentation, when it should be met with love and compassion. It would mean the world to me if this book helps to bring that to life.'

— Wai Chim

The Author

Wai Chim is a first-generation Chinese-American from New York City. She grew up speaking Cantonese at home and absorbing Western culture through books, TV and school. She spent some time living in Japan before making Sydney, Australia, her permanent home. Her previous books include the Chook Chook series and *Shaozhen*, part of the Through My Eyes: Natural Disaster Zone series. Her novel *Freedom Swimmer* was short-listed for the inaugural Readings Young Adult Book Prize and the Sakura Medal, and was a Children's Book Council Notable Book. In addition to writing, Wai works as a digital producer/web developer for The Starlight Children's Foundation.

