

HISTORY ISN'T DEAD – HISTORY LIVES!

by Christopher Cheng

We need history for students so that children of today, who will be the leaders of tomorrow, can learn the story behind who and why we are. Why are there so many nationalities in our country? How did early exploration influence great scientists? What did the early settlers do to establish and control the land? How did those early immigrants survive in a country where the colour of your skin was very, very important?

And history can be a riveting story to read... well at least it can be if it is written as well as any fiction narrative. There is death, murder, robbery, imprisonment, mystery, excitement, adventure and maybe even a little bit of magic, all in riveting un-put-downable incidents that really did happen – the story doesn't have to be made up! It really happened!

New Gold Mountain and *The Melting Pot* are two of my historical fiction titles in the My Australian Story series. They focus on the Chinese community, immigration and gold in Australia's recent history.

For me writing historical fiction involves copious amounts of research. For the first title it was three months of research before I even started to write the words that became the story. I might know the facts about the incident on which my story is based, but I needed to know the facts behind the story before I write it. I also try to ensure that I stick as close to the incidents – the things that actually happened – as possible.

In these titles if the text says that it was raining on a particular day –

it probably was. Copious research revealed this information. I contact the Bureau of Meteorology to obtain the weather conditions for the day. I read the local newspapers for clues to weather conditions – some actually print weather details, others you have to read the articles to find out what the weather was like.

For each of these books I have archive boxes filled with information gathered from libraries by pouring over microfilm, flicking through old newspapers, personal letters, journal entries, old books. These things don't just tell you what happened, they also reveal the culture and the climate of the time, the words that were being reported and spoken by the general population, the clothes that people were wearing and how they moved from place to place.

For *The Melting Pot* I spent much time in the national archives offices reading the certificates that the Chinese residents had to complete to go back home and visit China. But it wasn't simply reading the official printed words on the paper. It was looking at the photographs, reading the scripts that people wrote (some simply signed the page with an 'X' looking at the blood stains and the sweat marks and smelling the glues that were used to attach the photos. It was also reading the comments that were written by the officials who processed the documents. Did these actually reveal the facts of the story? No. But they did tell parts of the story behind the facts. This is what gives depth and character to the work. And all of the information gleaned, no matter how small and possibly insignificant to someone else, is written into one of my many note books.

Another of my historical fiction titles is in the National Museum's Making Tracks series – *Seams of Gold*. My story

was based on a basket, so I needed to find the story behind the basket. Talking to curators was an invaluable source of information. They know the provenance of the articles in their collections – the dates of the items, who owned them, what they were used for, where the articles had been and heaps more. And that is just one of the reasons why our museums and the curators who know so much are SO valuable. Of course, for my basket very little was known except from where it was purchased, and the basket contents.

I was able to take the knowledge that I had acquired from writing my previous two historical titles and weave in the few facts that were known about the basket, as well as other cultural facts that I also knew from research and my own life and create a very fictional title. I was finally able to weave into my stories a travelling Chinese opera troupe!

And more recently I wrote *30 Amazing Australian Animals*. Sure this is a non-fiction book filled with animal facts but there is also lots of history in these pages, with references to early botanists, explorers, settlers and their opinions of these bizarre creatures!

History can and must live.

Chris Cheng's books:

- *New Gold Mountain*, Scholastic Australia, 2005, ISBN 9781865048518
- *The Melting Pot*, Scholastic Australia, 2007, ISBN 9781865049755
- *Seams of Gold*, National Museum of Australia, 2007, ISBN 9781876944520
- *30 Amazing Australian Animals*, Random House Australia, 2008, ISBN 9781741661910

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