



# *The Other Christy*

## Oliver Phommavanh

### SYNOPSIS:

For the last two years, Christy Ung has been in the same class as the loud-mouthed Christie Owens -- and now it's 3rd time unlucky in 6C. Christie Owens is the popular one so everybody calls Christy Ung, the Other Christy. She moved from Cambodia in Year 4 and is still a loner at school. Christy's one solace is baking with her Auntie who suggests they bake a cake for Christy to share with her class on her birthday. Maybe a sweet treat can win them over and Christy might find a friend. She just didn't expect it to be Christie. When Christie is ditched by her besties, the two girls who share a name strike an unlikely friendship. Christy lets down her guard, revealing secrets about her weird upbringing with her clean-obsessed Grandpa. But Christy soon realises that she and her new friend are worlds apart. Can she ever shake off her Grandpa's strange habits? And will the two girls ever have more in common than just their name?

### WRITING STYLE

- A tale of belonging at school and friendship, drawn from Oliver's teaching experience and observing the dynamics of the different kids in his classes and their social woes.
- A tender story about an immigrant grandpa who takes care of his granddaughter in a new country.
- Peppered with Oliver's popular style of humour but at the same time sensitively focusing on the more serious issues of a multi-cultural upbringing and the problems some kids have with friendship and belonging, especially at school.
- In the tradition of 'Hating Alison Ashley' and the 'Friendship Matchmaker' series. Similar girl narratives in the style of Morris Gleitzman and Catherine Bateson.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver is a young Thai-Australian writer for children. He has featured on panels at the Sydney Writers' Festival among many other appearances at festival and writing event as well as in blogs. He has worked as a primary school teacher and now spends his time writing and sharing his writing passion with kids and engaging them with humour. He's also a stand-up comedian and has appeared on national TV and radio as well as a number of well-known comedy venues such as the Comedy Store in Sydney. His first book, *Thai-riffic!*, was published in June 2010 to critical acclaim, followed by *Con-nerd* in 2011, *Punchlines* and *Thai-no-mite* in 2012, and *Ethan* in the Stuff Happens series in 2015. Visit Oliver at his website :<http://www.oliverwriter.com>

# STUDY NOTES/ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS

## BACKGROUND RESEARCH:

- Who were the Khmer Rouge?
- What was life in Cambodia like under their regime?
- What impact would this have on people who managed to survive?

## THEMES:

### Families

- Why is Christy so embarrassed by her Grandpa?
- What sorts of things do your parents or grandparents do that embarrass you?
- How is Christy's family different from the other Christie's family?
- What is the difference between a nuclear and an extended family?
- How does Aunt May help Christy to deal with the loss of her mother?
- What does Christie Owens envy about Christy's family?
- Uncle Hung is not really related to Christy at all. Why would the family call him Uncle?
- Do those you regard as close family have to be related to you?
- What does it mean to treat someone like family?

### Secrets

- Why does Christy's grandpa not tell her about life in Cambodia?
- Why does she not tell him about her loneliness and troubles at school?
- Would Christy find it easier to talk to her grandfather if they were not two generations apart?
- Why do we struggle to talk to our parents and grandparents about things that are important to us?
- How would Christy's relationship with her grandfather have been different if they had confided in each other more?
- Do you think it is better to shelter children and protect them from ugly realities or is it better to tell them the whole story?

### Activity:

- Stage a class discussion or debate as to whether it is better to protect children or expose them to the truth.

### Legacies of the past

- *Grandpa's weird like that. He likes to make the most of what he can find. It came in handy when we first came to Australia with hardly anything (p8). Why might Christy's grandfather like to make use of anything he can find?*
- Why is Christy's grandfather so paranoid about dirt and germs?
- Why does he want his meat well done, but not burnt?
- Consider what the living conditions were like in Cambodia. *I remember living in our little house on Uncle Hung's land, with the dirt floors and cardboard walls. I remember taking baths using a bucket of water and using newspapers for a*

*toilet and then having to get rid of it. It was harder doing chores around the house because of the hot and sticky weather. My sweaty clothes would be always glued to my skin. I remember sleeping on a hard straw mat, underneath a mosquito net. I couldn't lie on my side because my hips would hurt. I know life was rough, I was there. But that was then.* (pp 48-49). Why can't Christy's grandpa put all this behind him?

- What other fears might he have as a result of this time of his life?
- *But we've been here three years now. We live in a lucky country. Why can't we just enjoy it – at least sometimes?* (p51). In what way is Australia a lucky country? Why can't Christy's grandfather just relax and enjoy it?
- Why does Christy's aunt more easily adapt to Australia than her father does?
- What do you think Christy and her grandfather would have found most surprising or different when they came to Australia from Cambodia?
- Why does Christy's grandfather dress her in boys' clothes?
- Make a list of things that Christy's family do or eat that are different from other families at her school.
- Why does Christy's grandpa feel responsible for her mother's death? Is this fair? Could he have done anything to prevent it?
- How has it shaped the way he lives his life now?

#### Activity

- Many people's way of life is shaped by previous experiences. For example, people who grew up during the war are more likely to ration food and cleaning products. Talk to your parents and grandparents about any habits they have maintained as a result of earlier life experiences and make a class list.

#### **Respect**

- Consider the different ways Christy and Christie treat their families. Who do you think shows more respect? Why might this be the case?
- Why might Christie Owens and the other girls at school be messier than Christy?
- What does this suggest about how much they respect their possessions?
- Would you agree that the more we have the less we respect it?
- What evidence can you find in the novel to support this?

#### **Language Barriers**

- What challenges would Christy and her grandfather face through not being able to speak English?
- Why has Christy learned to speak it faster than her grandfather?
- How would people treat them when their English is poor?
- How would it feel as an adult to be treated as a child because of language difficulties?

#### Activity

- Spend an hour speaking a made up language other than English around your peers or family. Make a journal entry about the experience
  - How did the inability to communicate make you feel?
  - How did other treat you when you couldn't speak to them?
  - Did you devise any methods to help improve communication, or did people give up?

- What specific difficulties did you face?

### Friendship

- Why does Christy struggle to make friends?
- Do you think there is anything she could do to improve her own situation?
- Why does cooking for the class help her to make friends?
- Why does no one go to Christie Owens' birthday party even though she appears to be popular?
- Why are Liana and Charlotte friends with Christie? *'They're beasties, you mean' she spits. 'I knew Liana was secretly jealous of me, she was just looking for an excuse not to be my friend anymore.'* *She focuses on her shoelaces. 'And Charlotte's like a sheep, she'd obey anyone who barks at her.'* What do they gain from the friendship? (p61)
- *'When did you two become friends?'*  
*I look around to see if anybody heard her. I don't know if I can use that word yet. 'We just hang out at recess and lunch.'*  
*'Yeah, just like me and Brenda. That's what friends do.'* *She points to her dictionary. 'Look it up'* (p85)  
What does friendship involve? How do you know when you are friends with someone? Is Christy expecting too much from a friendship?
- What characteristics does Christy Ung have that make her a good friend?
- Why does Christie Owens bully Christy Ung?
- Why does Christie Owens become friends with Christy Ung?
- How does Christy Ung change when she has a friend? (Both positive and negative changes).
- How does Christie Owens change?
- Why do friends often use nicknames for each other?
- *Christie holds her hands in the air like she's been caught. 'Hey, it's okay, Ung. I was just joking...I like to poke fun at my friends, I call it jopoking'* (p98). Is it ok to poke fun at your friends/ what problems can this cause? Are there people you tolerate teasing from and others you do not? Why?
- Why might people from different cultures particularly struggle with the Australian tendency to use nicknames and to poke fun at people?
- *That's the problem. I'm afraid of what would happen if I was myself. I can't show her the real Christy, not just yet* (p113). Should you be able to show a true friend the real you? Why is Christy so hesitant to do so?
- Christie Owens argues that they need more people in their group. Do you agree that friendship groups are better if they have more than just two people? Why? What are the advantages? What might be the disadvantages of a larger group?
- Why does Christy get jealous when Christie and Mackenzie work together on the assignment?
- Why does Christie Owens go back to Liana and Charlotte when Christy is away sick?
- Why would she rather be with these girls than on her own?
- What does it mean to be a true friend?

### Bullying

- What things does Christie Owens do that could be considered bullying?

- Auntie Mayly tells Christy ‘*Well, some kids pick on others for attention*’ (p29). Why do kids do this?
- Why might Christie Owens need attention?
- What methods does she use to get attention?
- How does this make others react to her?
- Auntie Mayly tells Christy ‘*The best thing you can do is just be kind to her*’ (p30). Do you agree that this is a good way to deal with bullies?
- *Why does she always have to make fun of me? Is it because I never fight back? I know Auntie Mayly wants to me to be kind to her, but I think she’ll just tease me more.* (p43). Do you agree with Christy?
- How is Christy’s way of getting attention different from Christie Owens’ way?
- *I hope Auntie Mayly is right about winning people over with food. Is that why Christie Owens keeps bringing in her birthday cakes? And she comes with chocolate eggs at Easter, and candy canes at Christmas too. Or does she just bring things in so I can miss out on them?* (p41). Why do you think Christie Owens brings all of these things to school?
- When Christy bakes her birthday cake she initially wants revenge on Christie Owens. Is this the right thing to do? Why does she give in and offer Christie a piece of cake?
- How does this reveal the differences in the girls’ behaviour and attitudes?
- How does Christie’s situation change when she stops bullying?

### Identity

- Why does Christy struggle with being known as ‘the Other Christy’? Why would she rather just be called Ung?
- What does it reveal about Christie Owens that she makes Christy Ung the Other Christy?
- How does this name prevent Christy Ung from being known in her own right?
- How does Christy’s family situation help to shape her identity?
- What other factors make her who she is?
- Why is it hard for the other students to really get to know her?
- Christy Ung and Christie Owens are similar in many ways. Make a list of similarities and differences between the two girls. What do you think causes these differences? Is it just their personalities or their situations?

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES	REASONS

## Symbols and Motifs

### Solar System

The planets and solar system are used as a motif throughout the novel (a recurring metaphor). For example: *If our class is the solar system, she’s the sun. That makes me Pluto. I feel sorry for Pluto. It used to be a planet but now it can’t hang out with the others. It’s just a rock floating in space. I know how that feels. I’m just a meteorite floating around here at school* (p13).

- Make a list of any incidents of this motif as you read.
- Why do you think the author chose to use this image?

- What do all the components of the solar system have in common?
- In what ways are they different?

### **Cleanliness**

*I feel like he wraps me in cling wrap, pops me into a ziplock plastic bag and then into another airtight container. He means well but I can't breathe when he's around sometimes (p15).*

- What does Christy's grandfather do to try to protect her?
- How might this be seen to cause more harm than good?
- Christie Owens tells Christy that we all need to be exposed to germs in order to develop our immune systems. How can this be seen to mirror the problems caused by over protecting Christy? How is her 'immune system' of life skills underdeveloped because of her grandfather's behaviour?
- What else might the grandfather's obsession with cleanliness represent? How does it help him to gain control or order in his world?
- What are the dangers of only telling children the 'sanitised' version of events?
- Christy wishes her grandpa would just 'come clean' and tell her the truth. What other examples of cleanliness related phrases can you find in the novel?