



Teachers' notes
Written by Donna Mulazzani

THAI-RIFFIC!

by Oliver Phommavanh

Years 7-8

Summary

'Same same, but different. It's what Thai people say when they're talking about something similar, like a fake watch or copied DVD. It feels and looks the same but it's not the real thing. I know how that fake watch feels. I'm a fake Aussie. I was made in Thailand. People can spot it straight away. I sound like an Aussie but I smell like Thai food. I live in Australia but my house is a Thai restaurant.' (p.3)

Starting high school and fitting in is hard enough without having the constant feeling that you are different. Unfortunately for Albert having a surname like Lengviriyakul means that it sounds like he's *'from Mars. Either that or [his] parents are some species of dinosaur'* (p.29). Previously cursed with the nickname of *'Bow-Thai'* Albert is relieved when his new high school teacher calls him *'Lengy'*, believing it to be *'perfect for an Aussie'* (p.37), and hopes that this might mark the beginning of his cultural transformation. If only he could convince his mum that *'everyone buys their lunch'* (p.27) in high school, he might one day be able to escape the curse of his *'blue Tupperware box ... filled with rice and steamed chicken'* (p.27).

As owners of Thai-riffic!, Albert's parents are extremely proud of both their Thai heritage and their restaurant, yet he doesn't share the same enthusiasm. Perhaps it's the fact that he's made to wear a *'bright red T-shirt with 'Life's Thai-riffic!' in gold writing across the chest'* (p.11), whilst delivering *'an army of flyers'* (p.9) or the fact that they have his *'face and address on them'* (p.9) but Albert is so embarrassed of his family that he's convinced the flyers are a *'permission note to tease [him] for life'* (p.9). To make matters worse, his parents obviously don't understand how ruthless teenagers can be when he is unwittingly recruited

to purchase 1440 rolls of toilet paper; *'if someone sees' him, he'll 'be the joke of the school'* (p.45).

Somehow Albert manages to survive the embarrassment and becomes surprisingly popular when everyone discovers that his parents are Thai cooks, but *'he's tired of having the same stuff all the time'* (p.53). He would be far happier with a diet of hot chips and pizza, but has to settle for being a *'guinea pig'* (p.51) for his Grandma who *'comes up with new specials'* (p.51) for their restaurant. Albert refuses to follow the family tradition as he fears being stuck working *'at Thai-riffic! forever'* (p.54). Determined to be popular for something other than his parents cooking, he goes so far as trying to sabotage their food at the multicultural feast and he is desperate to win a world record *'that might last forever'* (p.109). Ironically his plan backfires and they all love the *'spicy fireworks'* (p.70) and he becomes a *'real hero'* (p.73).

Hence Lengy is torn between two worlds, he's desperate to be recognized in his own right yet he's also happy to bathe in this new-found kudos. At school he's eating meat pies and learning to play cricket, whilst at home he dons traditional Thai dress to serve customers at the restaurant. He cares for his family, but he fails to understand that they are inevitably a part of who he is. Lengy is slow to learn the value of his family and it takes his mate, Rajiv, and his wise Grandma, to point out that he's popular because of who he is, not because of who he wants to be; *'there's nothing wrong with'* (p.191) being the same as your family.

Before Reading the Novel

- Consider the internal and external covers of the book. Are you able to get a feeling about the story based on the blurb and illustrations? What does it give away that could help you piece together what might happen in the book? Record your ideas so that you can revisit them during your reading of the novel.
- The blurb details a *'recipe for a normal life'*. Write a recipe for your own normal life.

Character Profiles

Albert Lengviriyakul a.k.a. Lengy

Lengy is not a bad kid, but he does take delight in reeking havoc. Whether it be attacking Mr Robert's house with *'a flyer bomb'* (p.23), aiming to drive his teacher *'crazy and send him back to the loony bin'* (p.36), or starting a *'mud war'* (p.104) at the Thai New Year celebrations, he has a knack for causing trouble and then charming his way out of it. He struggles to come to terms with who he is as opposed to who, he thinks, people want him to be. Eventually his mischievous ways and kind heart endear him to all.

Rajiv

Rajiv is *'an Indian kid'* (p.30) in Lengy's class and they quickly become the best of friends. *'There's only two seasons in Rajiv's world. Cricket and soccer'* (p.53), and he quickly teaches Lengy how to play both sports. Whilst Rajiv's family also comes from a multi-cultural background, his family *'still have Indian food and [his] parents wear traditional clothes ... they're full-on Aussies now'* (p.182). He is *'crazy about Thailand'* (p.182), and Lengy resents the fact that his parents treat *'Rajiv like he's their long-lost son'* (p.182). Rajiv forgives Lengy for being a bad friend and, in the process, helps him to appreciate the value of his family and the cultural heritage.

Grandma

As the matriarch of the family, Grandma *'discovered Australia'* (p.52) for them, which *'makes her a legend in [Lengy's] book'* (p.52). She *'comes to cook ... every week'* (p.51) and seems to have *'more wisdom than a box of fortune cookies'* (p.63). Whilst Lengy is often dismissive of his parents, he listens to his Grandma's advice as she teaches him about karma and his Thai heritage.

Mr Winfree

When Mr Winfree announces that *'you're going to have a fab-tastic year, because I'm your teacher!'* (p.35), Lengy doesn't believe him. Convinced that he *'looks like a reject from Playschool'* (p.34), Lengy struggles to take him and his unorthodox ways seriously. Yet Mr Winfree's quick wit and acceptance of individuality endears him to all his students. He surprises Lengy with some *'Aussie tucker'* (p.68) at the multicultural festival, as he recognizes the identity crisis that he is going through. Like Rajiv, Mr Winfree is also fascinated with Thai culture and even becomes one of Thai-riffic's best customers.

Themes

Personal Identity & Individuality

- Lengy describes himself as being *'same same, but different.'* (p.3)
- Albert is anxious about starting high school and he's convinced that *'every kid will know who'* (p.9) he is and that the unfortunate nickname of *'Bow-Thai'* will follow him from primary school. The *'nickname still hurts [him], like a splinter caught under a finger nail'* (p.16).
- Lengy wonders: *'Why can't I be the same same as everyone else?'* (p.9)
- Lengy's thinks his new nickname is *'perfect for an Aussie.'* (p.37)

- *'There's no way [Lengy's] speaking Thai in public' as he thinks that his 'looks and surname are bad enough.'* (p.38)
- Mr Winfree organizes a *'feast to celebrate our cultural diversity'* (p.56) and *'World Records Day'*. (p.109)
- After missing out on a number of record attempts, Lengy wonders, *'what am I good at?'* (p.114)
- Mum tells Lengy that he's *'lucky that [he] can speak Thai'*. (p.142)
- Lengy rejects his Thai culture when he refuses to work with Rajiv on their assignment: *'You can do Thailand, not me ... I'm doing something else.'* (p.177)

Friendships

- Lengy's lost touch with his primary school friends, Sinh and Danny. (p.16)
- Lengy meets Rajiv on the first day of high school and *'I'm already his mate'*. (p.30)
- Rajiv is supportive of Lengy and tries to teach him how to play cricket (p.55) and soccer (p.88).
- Whilst Lengy treats Rajiv poorly over their assignment, Rajiv sticks by his friend. (p.188)

Family

- Lengy lives with his Mum, Dad and little brother, Kitchai, in an apartment above their restaurant, Thai-riffic!
- The photo on the Thai-riffic! menu *'belongs in a box marked UFO (Unbelievable Family Objects), DO NOT OPEN.'* (p.8)
- Lengy's parents *'love buying things in bulk for Thai-riffic!'* (p.41); his mum's *'not a bargain hunter, she's a predator. She can sniff out a special deal in the next suburb.'* (p.43)
- *'Grandma has been teaching'* his mum *'to cook since she was Kitchai's age.'* (p.52)
- Lengy's dad loves to share *'the legend of the self-made chef'*. (p.60)
- Kitchai and Lengy are both expected to help the family at the restaurant.
- The restaurant reviewer writes that visiting Thai-riffic! is *'an invitation into Albert's house, where his family will make you feel at home.'* (p.166)
- In the end Lengy decides that he and his dad are *'the same same, but different, and there's nothing wrong with that'*.

Text, Style, Mood and Structure

- Oliver Phommavanh heavily relies on humour to engage his readers. Have students recount their favourite part of the text and discuss why they found it so amusing.

- Phommavanh uses a mix of written and visual techniques, analyse why he does this and what is the effect?
- The Thai New Year is celebrated with a water festival, research the different ways that this event is celebrated around the world.
- Have students try their hand at comedy writing and construct their own plans to send a relief teacher crazy.
- Construct a visual recount of a favourite part of the novel by reinterpreting it in to a comic strip.
- The text celebrates multiculturalism within our society. As a class research the cultural backgrounds of your students and host your own banquet.
- The chapter entitled '*The Legend of the Self-made Chef*' (p.60) is written like a play script. Using this as a model, have small groups of students rewrite their favourite part of the novel as a script. They could then perform their play for the rest of the class.
- The text offers the opportunity for students to explore some personal and creative writing of their own:
 - Lengy wishes that he was the same as everyone else, but what would the world really be like if we were all the same?
 - Mr Winfree encourages his students to compete for their own world records. You could either host your own World Record Day or have students reflect on what they are good at.
 - Write a restaurant review that captures a snapshot of your own family meals.