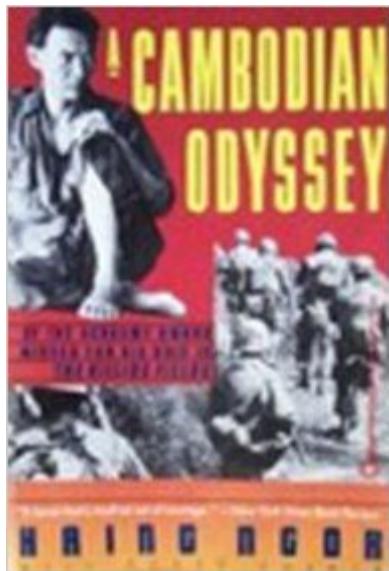


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A Cambodian Odyssey



Synopsis

Widely acclaimed in hardcover, this is a searing personal memoir of life in war-torn Cambodia, joining the ranks of the most important books on the Vietnam era.

Book Information

Paperback: 478 pages

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Customer Reviews

I thought Cambodia was a city in Vietnam, I was really misinformed. This book really opened my eyes to the horrors that happened there. It was well written and easy to read.

Best book ever written, in my opinion.

This book started off with a bang. The events of 1975 Cambodia are covered well with a lot of interesting observations. The enforcers of the Khmer Rouge, it seems, were mainly children with automatic weapons. The atrocities, lies and horrible conditions that the people of Cambodia faced at the hands of the "liberators" are described in detail, sometimes lurid. However, the author went on a little too far spending many pages talking about life after scooting out of the troubled country.

I knew little of the details of the Khmer Rouge atrocities and Cambodian genocide until I visited Cambodia recently. The trip to the Killing Fields and Tuol Seng prison inspired me to read more about this awful period in Cambodia's history which still has noticeable effects on the prosperity of that country to this day. I read several other autobiographies, then watched the 1984 movie "The Killing Fields" with Sam Waterston, John Malkovich and Haing Ngor. One of the bonus features

included on the DVD noted that Haing Ngor was a Cambodian survivor who had left the refugee camps in 1980 to come to the U.S. and was selected for this important role in the film though he had never acted before. I wanted to know more about this gentle, intelligent man, and discovered that he had written this autobiography after his success with the film. Though this is probably not the definitive report of what happened in Cambodia during the 4 years from 1975-1979, Ngor's book does report in graphic and intimate detail the horrors of the evacuation from Phnom Penh, as well as the degradation and deprivation of the "war slaves" that were commanded by a rag tag collection of Khmer Rouge boy soldiers. The evacuees never really knew what was going on - why they were herded from one village to another and forced to work the fields or build canals with minimal tools under oppressive starvation conditions. Cambodians of all economic classes were stripped of all their possessions and privileges, even eyeglasses, and forced to work in subhuman conditions with little shelter or clean water or even a subsistence level of rice. Private property was abolished. Monasteries and Buddha statues were destroyed. Religion was banned. Many died of diseases that would have been easy to cure with simple medicines. Ngor, a doctor who knew how to treat such diseases, recovered from several bouts of dysentery and malaria. The evacuees stole food and foraged in the fields and forest, eating anything organic - leaves and roots, mice and insects. Many died of starvation and overwork. The threat of beatings or imprisonment was ever present. Haing Ngor survived 3 trips to prison, each with a particularly gruesome form of torture. He precedes the retelling of each prison visit with a gentle reminder that the reader can skip the succeeding pages as they are hard to bear. 80% of Ngor's family members perished during the reign of Pol Pot, and it was widely believed that between 20-25% of the population vanished during these years. The country was essentially destroyed - infrastructure in ruins, schools non existent, hospitals shuttered, families torn apart. The Cambodian society had lost its moral direction. During the exodus from Phnom Penh, the atrocious had become normal. The story of Ngor's escape across the border to reach a refugee camp in Thailand was equally brutal. He prayed many times during these years to be put to death by his captors, but somehow his indomitable spirit endured. At the end of the book he wrote that he felt that it was his "kama" (karma) to survive so that he could continue to help other Cambodians build a new life. You cannot read this book without shuddering at the horrific atrocities of the genocide. Nor can you fail to be inspired by the indomitable will to survive and endure such conditions.

This is an outstanding portrait of a man who survived the barbaric reign of terror of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Anyone who has seen the movie "The Killing Fields" has a cursory

understanding of the Khmer Rouge and their attempt to transform Cambodian society during their control of the country from 1975 to 1979. However, this film omitted most of the astounding atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge as anyone who has visited Tuol Sleng S-21 in Phnom Penh (as I have) can tell you. In this book Dr. Ngor relates his horrifying experiences of life under the Khmer Rouge in detail and in the process educates the reader as to just how horrible an existence it really was. This book is remarkable because of the detail related by Dr. Ngor and the personal nature of its content. Many Cambodians to this day will not talk about his period in their lives. For many, the mental and physical abuse they suffered during this period was too painful to re-live ever again. As I read this book, I could not help but wonder how Dr. Ngor was able to keep himself together. Dr. Ngor effectively puts the period of Khmer Rouge rule in historical context by explaining the historical events and forces which led to their capture of the country. These events and forces included the People's Republic of China, North Vietnam, the Vietnam War, the United States, and of course, the C.I.A. I admire Dr. Ngor for his extraordinary courage, and I regret that I did not have the opportunity to meet him during his lifetime. May he rest in peace.

I was drawn into this book after first viewings of the film "The Killing Fields." At the time, I was unaware of a lot of the background to many of the events depicted onscreen, and was looking for something a bit more detailed. As it turned out, this book was something far greater than that, on a par with the writings of Primo Levi, or Elie Wiesel as a depiction of survival amid the most grotesque extremes in ideological depravity humanity could conjure up. Through survival, later stardom and human rights work, Dr. Ngor became (and posthumously remains) one of the great human rights educators of our time. In this eloquent autobiography, he also accomplishes something else - vivid and affectionate portrayals of Cambodian culture (pre-revolution), and a detailed description of the slide into civil war and the anarchic chaos of Phnom Penh immediately before the fall. And he also crafts a love story; a memorable and majestic one, of a romance that he attempted to nourish in spite of the societal upheaval occurring around him and his wife. The detail in his descriptions of family are affectionate, and also written with a rare clarity - for this, among many other reasons, this book is a classic. -David Alston

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