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Reader Resources

In the Shadow of the Banyan

by Vaddey Ratner



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“My purpose is to honor the lives lost, and I wanted to do so by endeavoring to transform suffering into art.”

Preface

Raami is only seven years old when the Khmer Rouge regime comes to power in Cambodia and she is swept from an idyllic childhood in Phnom Penh into four years of chaos and hardship. Through it all, Raami relies on the stories and poems her beloved father told her to keep herself and hope alive.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

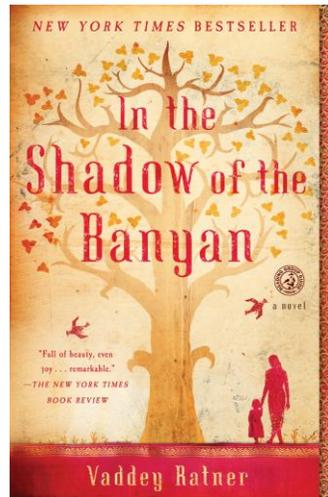
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

"To keep you is no gain, to kill you is no loss." For seven-year-old Raami, the collapse of her childhood world begins with the footsteps of her father returning home in the early dawn hours, bringing details of the upheaval that has overwhelmed the streets of Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh. It is April 1975, and the civil war between the U.S.-



backed government and the Khmer Rouge insurgency has reached its climax. As Raami plays in the magical world of her family's estate, she is intrigued by the adults' hushed exchanges that pit hopes for the long-awaited peace against fears that this might be the end of the life they know, a life protected and cushioned by their royal lineage. On the morning of the lunar New Year, a young soldier dressed in the black of the Revolution invades that world of carefully guarded privilege. Within hours, Raami and her family join a mass exodus as the new Khmer Rouge regime evacuates Cambodia's cities.

Over the next four years, as she endures the tragic deaths and violent executions of friends and family members, Raami clings to the only remaining vestige of her childhood—the magical tales and poems she learned from her father. Whenever Raami comes close to giving up hope, she looks up at the moon and recalls the intricate tales that her father created for her, stories of fortitude and love that instilled the values that will keep her alive.

About the Author

A Conversation with Vaddey Ratner

***In the Shadow of the Banyan* is a novel, but it is closely based on your family's experience in Cambodia during the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979. Why did you decide to write it as a novel rather than a memoir?**



Vaddey Ratner, 2011 (Photo: Kristina Sherk)

I was a small child when the Khmer Rouge took over the country. Revisiting that period of our life, I found that I couldn't trust myself completely to recall the exact details of the events and places and the chronology of our forced exodus from the city to the countryside, the journey from one place to the next during the span of those four years. I did initially try to write it as a memoir. But sorting through my own memories and what my mother was able to share with me, as well as the historical record, I kept asking myself again and again, *What is the story I want to tell? What is my purpose for telling it?* It isn't so much the story of the Khmer Rouge experience, of genocide, or even of loss and tragedy. What I wanted to articulate is something more universal, more indicative, I believe, of the human experience—our struggle to hang onto life, our desire to live, even in the most awful circumstances. In telling this story, it isn't my own life I wished others to take note of. I have survived, and the gift of survival, I feel, is honor enough already. My purpose is to honor the lives lost, and I wanted to do so by endeavoring to transform suffering into art.

That's not to say that a memoir doesn't demand artistry and skill. I've read many beautifully crafted literary memoirs—*Angela's Ashes*, *Autobiography of a Face*, *Running in the Family*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Woman Warrior*...In my case, because I was so young when the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia, and with hardly any surviving family records or pictures as source material, I had only my own mostly traumatic recollections and the understandably reluctant remembrances of my mother to rely on. What's more, those whom I wished to write about, whose sufferings I felt deserve to be heard and remembered above my own story, are gone. I didn't want them to be forgotten, and while, as Elie Wiesel has said, one cannot truly speak for the dead, I wished still to re-invoke the words

and thoughts they'd shared with me. I felt compelled to speak of their lives, their hopes and dreams when they were still alive. And to do this well, I realized, required me not only to cull from memory and history but also to employ imagination, the art of empathy.

Speaking of art, what was your inspiration for writing?

In writing, one often speaks of voice as if it belongs exclusively to each of us as a writer, as if it emerges from a source that's all our own. More than twenty years ago, when I was a high school student, I came across *Night* by Elie Wiesel. I didn't know what it was, whether a memoir or a novel. I don't think it even said on the book. It was a slim volume, just over a hundred pages, and I read it in one sitting. And then again and again. It was the first piece of Holocaust literature I read, even though I didn't know what the word *holocaust* meant at the time. It was this writing that set me on a search to find the voice for my own story at a time when I could only communicate the mundane in a language new to me. Elie Wiesel's journey through death and inhumanity so moved me that I aspired to one day write a book that would give voice to my own family's struggle for survival, for life, in the face of a different atrocity in Cambodia.

You were five years old when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, and your protagonist, Raami, is seven. Why did you decide to make her two years older?

In my own experience, I have the sense I began to perceive and understand much of what was happening about halfway through the Khmer Rouge regime, which was around when I turned seven, even though I wasn't sure how old I was at any given time. Still, I was aware that I was growing up, maturing. I was forced to be an adult by what I endured and witnessed. Yet, there was this part of me that wanted desperately to remain a child—to be protected, to escape from all the violence and suffering. I sought beauty wherever I could find it and I clung to it. So in choosing an age for Raami, I wanted her to have that balance between insight and innocence. In the beginning of the book she is a precocious and inquisitive child, but as the story progresses, she becomes more quiet and reflective, her curiosity turns to seeking—a search to understand.

Is Raami's experience very similar to yours? How does it differ?

Raami's experience parallels mine. There's not an ordeal she faces that I myself didn't confront in one way or another. The loss of family members, starvation, forced labor, repeated uprooting and separation, the overwhelming sense

that she's basically alone but also the tenacious belief that there's a spirit watching over her—all this I experienced and felt. Raami had polio as a baby. I had polio also when I was still an infant. Raami's long name, Vattaraami, in Sanskrit, means a "small garden temple." My own name, in the vernacular language, alludes to something similar. Vaddey, or "Watdey" as you pronounce it in Khmer, sounds like the "ground of a temple." This was why my father chose the name for me.

Where Raami's experience and mine diverge is in the minor details—the size of our family, the number of towns and villages we were sent to, the names of those places, the dates of various incidents. There are countless other small variations like these. As we discussed, she's two years older, but she's also a lot wiser than I was. She certainly regards the world with greater equanimity than I probably could at the time, than most of us can even as mature adults. Even so, as a child, I always had faith in people. In spite of the atrocities around me, I never failed to find kindness, to encounter protection and tenderness when I most needed it. I had a strong intuition about people. In writing *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, I needed to draw on that intuitive understanding, that ability to see and perceive people's humanity in a way that enlarged my own. Raami shares my faith in people. Perhaps the big difference is that she can articulate it, and in so doing, magnifies it even more. Her intuition becomes prescience.

Are the characters in your novel based on real family members?

Yes, but my actual family—the group of the uncles, aunts, and cousins who left the city with us—was much larger. The novel is a contained universe, so each character is there for a reason. If I were to include everyone in my family, it would be a mammoth book! In some instances, I had to combine family members to create one character, or make other changes. My father was actually the youngest of five children, for example. But in the story, I made Raami's father the older brother in order to capture the solemnity of my own father, his role as the pillar of the family. Every one of us looked to my father for reassurance.

So many scenes in your novel bring to life the unspeakable horror of this era of Cambodian history. Which scenes did you find the most difficult to write?

Every page was a struggle. I labored and labored, from a single word to a sentence to a paragraph. Each ordeal that had broken my heart when I was a child broke my heart again as an adult writing it. There were moments when I spiraled downward, to a depth I didn't think I could come back from. It was a painful story to write, to relive.

You write of your father in the Author's Note, "This is a story born of my desire to give voice to his memory, and the memory of all those silenced." Did you find it difficult to capture your father's voice all these years later, or did his way of speaking come naturally to you?

I've lived with my father's voice for so long. He's always with me and I've had long countless conversations with him. The challenge was not so much reaching back in time to capture his voice but reaching across languages. Essentially, I had to make my father speak English, and I had to do it in a way that wouldn't change the way he sounded in Khmer. In our language, one rarely addresses people by their names: it's either too formal or too disrespectful to use someone's name. For example, my father would almost always call me *koan*—"child"—which in Khmer is extraordinarily tender and intimate, but if Raami's father were to call her "child" or "my child," it would sound rather formal and distant, archaic even. So he calls her by her name and simply "darling" or other terms of endearment that my own father used with me.

The voice has to fit the character. I remember my father as solemn but never morose. He not only merely saw beauty in the world, but he reflected upon it, often aloud to me. He was always hopeful, and rather idealistic—as my mother often points out—but because there was a touch of sadness about him, I've always thought, there was a poetic quality to his person. He spoke like a poet. While he was not a poet, he was an avid reader of poetry, especially those Khmer epics in verse like the *Reamker* and *Mak Thoeung*. He loved words, and was himself a ceaseless weaver of stories. I wanted to capture my father's essential qualities and instill them in Raami's father. In a way, having Raami's father speak English helped me to write, to progress with the story. There were moments in the writing when, remembering my father's exact words as he'd spoken them to me in our language, the tenor and tenderness of his voice, I would break down completely, and it would take many days, weeks, to come back to the writing.

Your family, like Raami's, lost everything. Were you able to salvage any personal belongings or memorabilia?

Coming out of the experience, I thought we'd lost everything. Then, in 1993 in America, on my wedding day, my mother gave me a diamond brooch that she had received from my *sdechya*, my grandmother on whom Grandmother Queen is based. The brooch had been a wedding gift to my mother from my grandmother. More recently, as a gift to congratulate me on *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, my mother gave me a pair of diamond earrings.

The settings are new, she said, but the diamonds are hers from before the war.

I also have this tiny wallet-sized picture of my father from when he was young. My mother pried it apart from an ID paper after my father was taken away. She feared the ID paper would link us to him, so she threw away the paper but kept the photo. Years later in the U.S., I noticed that his name A. Sisowath was embossed on the right-hand side. It was a poignant discovery because in those early years in America it was the only tangible link I had to him—aside from my mother. No one else I knew then was aware of his existence. Looking at the picture now, I imagine unease in his pose—the asymmetrical slant of his shoulders, the questioning arch of his left brow, the tentative smile—as if he were uncomfortable with this attempt at permanency. I imagine him walking into the room, addressing the camera skeptically, and walking out again, his spirit always in constant movement, in flight.

Did you and your mother flee to a refugee camp in Thailand just as Raami and her mother did? How did you end up in the United States?

Our escape from Cambodia was even more obstructed and circuitous. At one point along an abandoned road we were recaptured by Khmer Rouge soldiers on the run from the invading Vietnamese troops. The Khmer Rouge took us from one village to the next, then into the forest, and deeper still into the jungle. We thought this was the end—here they would kill us. What I saw, what I witnessed on that journey alone is enough for another novel.

In 1981, you arrived in the United States as a refugee speaking no English, but went on to graduate as your high school class valedictorian in 1990, and *summa cum laude* from Cornell in 1995. How, after witnessing all of the terrible atrocities in Cambodia, were you able to not only move forward, but to thrive and succeed?

When we left Cambodia, the images that stuck with me, overwhelmed my mind, were of corpses—corpses and flies. Then, landing at the airport in California, I was struck by all the shiny glass and stainless steel, not a single fly anywhere! Everyone and everything was humming with energy. Even the luggage carousels rolled with magical vitality. I was so far from death. Right then and there, I realized that we had so much to catch up with. The world hadn't forgotten about us, but neither had it waited for us. It'd moved on, prospered. I felt so fortunate to be part of it. In Cambodia, staring at a muddy rain puddle, I could conjure up a whole underwater kingdom. Imagine what went through my mind walking into a supermarket in America! I remember the

Safeway supermarket our sponsor took us to after we'd resettled in Jefferson City, Missouri. *Safeway*. Even the name sounded like a haven! I had such a yearning...a hunger to learn, and that hunger overtook all else. I absorbed everything this country had to offer me. Whatever ordeals we faced in America were nothing compared to those in Cambodia. We were given so much. How could I not thrive and succeed? I believed this, and still do.

You only began to learn English on arriving in the U.S. at age 11. How did you learn to write? What was it like re-invoking the story in a language entirely different from the language of that experience?

It began with reading. I was a copious reader in my own language, and I was a copious reader as soon as I learned to read in English. I'd devour anything I could get my hands on. I read things I didn't quite understand. *Jane Eyre*, I remember, was my first grown-up novel. I thought it was so illicit—the man keeps his wife locked up in another part of his mansion while he develops romantic feelings for his young employee, this impoverished governess. Sounds like a Cambodian love story! But it wasn't just literature I read. I'd linger over descriptions on shampoo bottles, lost in the shower, deaf to my mother's call, soothed by adjectives—*foamy, invigorating, silky...* move on to the list of ingredients, all those scientific names had a ring and rhythm to them, almost like poetry. In chemistry class, learning to decode the letters and numbers in formulas, I came across "tetra," its familiarity heavy on my tongue. Then suddenly there was this flash in my memory. *Tetracycline*. I remembered that it was medicine—yellow and valuable as gold—that we'd had in our possession during our time in the countryside when medicine was almost nonexistent. Reading introduced me to an endless range of expression, from the thematic language of "family secrets" and "complicated love" articulated in a novel like *Jane Eyre* to small, incidental words that jogged my memory, revealing buried recollections.

Then, when it came to actually learning how to write, I basically did it on my own, at my own slow pace. Except for a community arts program in Minnesota called COMPAS when I was in high school, and a short-story writing course I took at Cornell University, I've had no formal training in writing. But I believe there are no better teachers than great pieces of writing: classics that tackle universal and timeless questions, and contemporary writings, from many cultural and linguistic backgrounds, that not only delve into these existential queries but also enlarge my world by transplanting me to a whole new geography of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

I wanted to do something similar with this story. I didn't want just to *translate* my family's experience, a Cambodian experience, to a foreign audience; I wanted to take the readers and *replant* them in the fertile ground I'd sprung from, to let them take root and sprout, and to see my world as their own. I wanted them to see Cambodia before it became synonymous with genocide, before it became the "killing fields." It was once a place of exquisite beauty, and I try to show that not only by locating the readers in the loveliness of the natural world but also by immersing them in the rhythm of a people's thoughts and sentiments, in its literature and art. Only when we know what existed can we truly mourn what is lost. So, I feel, writing *In the Shadow of the Banyan* was not just a retelling. It was an act of creation, a long journey toward its realization.

In the Author's Note you tell the story of visiting the royal court of Cambodia in 2009. Can you describe that experience? What was it like to return after all of those years?

Even before my visit to the Royal Palace, I had visited Cambodia countless times, always in search of my father. Each time I see him in all that's lost and in all that's found. My first trip back was in 1992. I went to my family's estate in Phnom Penh. Our house was not there. Everything was gone, except, I believe, for one charred column of the bath pavilion. But even though our home was gone, I revisited other places I remembered my father and I had frequented—the promenade along the river, the lotus fountains near the Independence Monument, temples around the city... During a trip several years later, I visited the Royal Palace, just the grounds that was open to tourists, and I came across a golden statue that took my breath away. It was of a man on a horse, with a sword in his raised hand. Very gallant! I remembered that statue! For a long time I had thought it was on our estate and that it depicted my father. But it turned out the statue was of one of the kings! When I told my mother about being shocked by that encounter and the confusion in my own remembering, she had a very simple explanation: I had often accompanied my father to the Royal Palace, and the statue, with its lovely surrounding gardens, was where my father and I would escape to from the formality of a ceremony or function inside the courtly halls. There, beside the statue, he would tell me stories and tales, using the ornate setting to launch into mythical adventures. In my memory, I suppose, my father and the statue became fused—a single entity.

From 2005 to 2009, when I returned with my husband and daughter to live in Phnom Penh, a lot of things became clear in my mind. In particular, I got to witness the power of the monsoon, how in a single day the rains could flood the land;

the different ways rice is grown and harvested through the seasons; the monumental struggles of the tiny creatures against the elements. I would spend hours with my little daughter watching a dung beetle fighting its way out of a cow pie! It was an epiphany. Living there—while at times difficult because of its proximity to the past—helped tremendously with the writing of *In the Shadow of the Banyan*.

In late 2009, just before returning to live in the States again, I was invited to have an audience with His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni, to be formally reintroduced into the royal family. I didn't want to go, actually. I panicked. What would I bring as a gift for the king? One ought to bring a gift, right? But what could His Majesty possibly desire? Chocolate? I didn't think so. I called my mother, and she said that I ought to consider a gift that would honor my father's name, his spirit. So I brought three tons of rice for the poor, as a contribution to His Majesty's humanitarian effort. At the Royal Palace, facing His Majesty, I could barely speak. All I could think about was my father, the sacrifice he'd made so that a moment such as this, my taking his place, was possible. And yet, I couldn't help thinking, he couldn't have known with absolute certainty that I would survive. He'd only hoped, and I felt that hope in my throat. When I swallowed it, tears rushed to my eyes. The next year, when I had another audience with the king, I was much more prepared and composed.

As *In the Shadow of the Banyan* makes clear, one of the Khmer Rouge's primary strategies was splitting up families. How do you maintain your connection to your family members today—including those who only live on in your memory?

I have an uncle in Cambodia now, one of my father's two elder brothers, the middle son. I despair every time I see him. I mourn his lost self. Once when he rode in a car with us to go to lunch, he became suddenly agitated. He explained that he was not used to being in a car and was completely disoriented. He was once a lover of cars. Now, no longer a prince, he lives a humble life, has kept the name he took on when we'd relinquished our royal identity, and feels most balanced when he shuffles along the uneven streets of Phnom Penh in flip-flops or barefoot. Whenever I look into his eyes, I think there are small deaths like these, some parts of ourselves that were buried with the others. My uncle cries every time he sees me, as I do when I see him or read the letters he sends me.

When I returned to live in Cambodia with my husband and daughter, one of the first things I did was to surround our new home with flowers I remembered from my childhood home. I filled our small garden with orchid, jasmine, bird of

paradise, lobster claw, and frangipani of different colors, even though, I learned, Cambodians believe it is a flower that attracts ghosts. If so, I thought, it was a fitting offering. I filled our vases each day with fresh stems of lotus. A couple of years later, we bought a piece of land in Siem Reap and built a house there, which for me was very therapeutic, a willful act to counter the destruction I had helplessly witnessed as a child.

How does your family, specifically your mother, feel about your decision to write *In the Shadow of the Banyan*?

My family is extremely supportive. They've watched me persevere for so long with this. They've not only seen me tormented by my recollection, by my reckoning with the past, but also by the labor of writing itself. They are very happy that this is a story I can now share with the world.

As for my mother, she's very proud. I couldn't have written this book without her blessing, and, of course, her sharing of painful memories. Some of the stories about family members she told me have made their way into the narrative. We've been through everything together. This book is hers, too.

An important theme of your novel is the power of stories. What do you hope readers will take away from your own storytelling?

I've always loved stories, the written word. Even at a very young age, I sensed their intrinsic power. Like Raami, I saw and understood the world through stories. In Cambodia, under the Khmer Rouge, when I was lost in a forest or abandoned by my work unit among the vast rice fields because I moved too slowly, I would recall the legends my father or nanny had told me or those tales I'd been able to read myself. I'd invoke them like incantations, chanting aloud descriptions and dialogues I'd memorized, to chase away my fear of being alone in the middle of nowhere, in the silence around me. Stories were magic spells, I felt, and storytelling, the ability to tell and recall something, was a kind of sorcery, a power you could use to transform and transport yourself. I still feel this way, and I think it shows in crafting *In the Shadow of the Banyan* as I did. But I hope the story is layered enough so that every reader finds the inspiration or message they seek.

Historical and Literary Context

The Khmer Rouge Regime

1950s

- 1954: The French are defeated at Dien Bien Phu. French Indochina is partitioned into Laos, Cambodia, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam.
- 1955: Conflict breaks out between North and South Vietnam. Prince Norodom Sihanouk declares Cambodian neutrality.

1960s

- 1960: A small group of Cambodians led by Saloth Sar (later known as Pol Pot) secretly form the Communist Party of Kampuchea, also known as the Red Khmers or Khmer Rouge.
- 1965: Sihanouk allows North Vietnamese guerrillas to set up bases in Cambodia in pursuit of their campaign against the U.S.-backed government in South Vietnam.
- 1969: In an effort to disrupt North Vietnamese supply lines, President Nixon orders an extensive bombing campaign in eastern Cambodia.

1970s

- 1970: Sihanouk is overthrown in March by his Prime Minister, Lon Nol, who proclaims Cambodia the Khmer Republic. North Vietnam invades Cambodia to support the Khmer Rouge.
- 1970: In April, U.S. ground troops enter Cambodia to attack the North Vietnamese forces.
- 1970: Vaddey Ratner is born into a centuries-old Cambodian royal family.
- 1975: On April 17, Cambodian capital Phnom Penh falls to the Khmer Rouge. Soldiers order the city's two million residents into the countryside at gunpoint. Thousands are killed in the chaos.

- 1977: The Khmer Rouge launch attacks into neighboring Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos.
- 1978: Vietnam launches a full-scale attack in late December, overwhelming the disorganized Khmer Rouge with tanks and thousands of ground troops.
- 1979: Days later, on January 7, Vietnamese forces enter Phnom Penh, ending the Khmer Rouge regime.

1980s

- 1981: Ratner arrives in rural Missouri as a refugee.

1990s

- 1990: Ratner graduates from high school in St. Paul, Minnesota.
- 1991: United Nations peacekeepers enter Cambodia.
- 1995: Ratner graduates summa cum laude from Cornell University, where she specialized in Southeast Asian history and literature.
- 1998: Pol Pot dies
- 1999: Remaining Khmer Rouge soldiers surrender; Cambodia achieves peace.

2000s

- 2005-2009: Ratner and her family live in Phnom Penh while she researches and writes *In the Shadow of the Banyan*.
- 2009: Ratner is invited to an audience with King Norodom Sihamoni, and reintroduced to the royal family.

2010s

- 2013: *In the Shadow of the Banyan* is published.

Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Regime

The Khmer Rouge regime had a devastating effect on Cambodia. Nearly two million people died from starvation, overwork, and execution. In addition, the regime dealt a severe blow to the history, culture, and traditions of Cambodia in its aim to create a classless society.

The Kingdom of Cambodia existed for centuries. In 1863, it fell under French colonial rule as part of French Indochina, and regained its independence in 1953. At this time, tensions in the area were escalating between Western democracy and Communism. Neighboring Vietnam split in 1954, dividing into a Communist North and a pro-Western South. Beginning in 1960, a small group of Cambodians, led by Saloth Sar (later known as Pol Pot) formed the Communist Party of Kampuchea (the ancestral name of the Kingdom of Cambodia). The group took inspiration from the teachings of Mao Zedong, envisioning a self-sufficient society free of Western influence that would thrive on communal agriculture.

The region grew increasingly volatile as the conflict in Vietnam escalated. U.S. troops landed in South Vietnam in 1965, and although Prince Sihanouk had declared Cambodia neutral, both the South Vietnamese insurgents and North Vietnamese army made use of their neighboring nation's land to launch attacks. Hoping to disrupt the supply lines to the North Vietnamese forces, President Nixon ordered an extensive bombing campaign in eastern Cambodia in 1969. The airstrikes lasted nearly four years.

Amidst this tumult, in March of 1970 Prince Sihanouk's government was overthrown by a Cambodian politician, Marshal Lon Nol, who declared Cambodia the Khmer Republic. The Communist Party of Kampuchea, otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge, moved out of hiding in a bid to rule the country. On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge overtook Phnom Penh, the capital city. Cambodian citizens were initially hopeful that this coup could lead to lasting peace, but Khmer Rouge soldiers ordered the city's two million inhabitants into the countryside at gunpoint. Thousands were killed in the chaos.

The Khmer Rouge, trying to achieve their vision of "Democratic Kampuchea," a classless society, began a campaign to erase the traditions and culture of Cambodia. Art, religion, individuality, currency, and personal property were forbidden. The traditional concept of family was abolished, and even speaking to a loved one could result in vicious punishment.

The regime released their "Four-Year Plan" in 1976, which aimed to dramatically increase rice cultivation. To accomplish this goal, the regime forced Cambodians into grueling labor. Citizens were required to work more than 12 hours a day, often without adequate food or water. An estimated 500,000 to 1.5 million Cambodians died of disease, starvation, or exhaustion alone.

The regime was also notorious for imprisoning and executing those who failed to obey or spoke against it. At one of the most infamous prisons, S-21 (now known as Tuol Sleng), between 14,000 and 17,000 people entered and only a few are thought to have survived. Others who failed to meet the regime's vague standards of loyalty were executed and placed in mass graves in rural areas known as "killing fields."

The Khmer Rouge regime was defeated in 1979 by Vietnamese forces. The Vietnamese attempt to establish a new government was a rocky one. Guerilla attacks by Khmer Rouge renewed fighting, and hundreds of thousands of Cambodians fled to nearby Thailand. The U.S. eventually accepted approximately 150,000 refugees. It wasn't until 1999 when the last of the Khmer Rouge soldiers surrendered that Cambodia achieved lasting peace. In partnership with the United Nations, Cambodia created a tribunal in 2003 to prosecute the senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge. By this time, several of the regime's leaders (including Pol Pot) had already died, but enough remained alive to create four cases, which are ongoing.

The Khmer Rouge did not succeed in erasing Cambodian culture. In the years since the regime's defeat, music, dance, filmmaking, art, and religion have flourished.

Additional Reading

[Khmer Rouge History](#)

[Cambodia 1975-1979](#)

[Cambodia's Brutal Khmer Rouge Regime](#)

Discussion Questions

1. According to the prophecy that Grandmother Queen tells Raami at the beginning of the novel, "There will remain only so many of us as rest in the shadow of a banyan tree." What does the prophecy mean to Raami when she first hears it? How does her belief in the prophecy change by the end of the novel? After reading, what does the title of this novel mean to you?
2. Tata tells Raami, "The problem with being seven—I remember myself at that age—is that you're aware of so much, and yet you understand so little. So you imagine the worst." Discuss Raami's impressions as a seven-year-old. How much is she aware of, and how much (or little) does she understand?
3. Review the scene in which Raami tells the Kamaphibal her father's real name. How does this serve as a turning point in the novel—what changes forever after this revelation? How does it affect Raami, and her relationship with both Papa and Mama?
4. Papa tells Raami, "I told you stories to give you wings, Raami, so that you would never be trapped by anything—your name, your title, the limits of your body, this world's suffering." How does the power of storytelling liberate Raami at different points in the novel?
5. Compare Mama's and Papa's styles of storytelling. When does each parent tell Raami stories, and what role do these stories serve? Which of Papa's stories did you find most memorable? Which of Mama's?
6. Consider Raami and her family's Buddhist faith. How do their beliefs help them endure life under the Khmer Rouge?
7. Discuss Raami's feelings of guilt over losing Papa and Radana. Why does she feel responsible for Papa's decision to leave the family? For Radana's death? How does she deal with her own guilt and grief?
8. What does Big Uncle have in common with Papa, and how do the two brothers differ? How does Big Uncle handle the responsibility of keeping his family together? What ultimately breaks his spirit?
9. Raami narrates, "my polio, time and again, had proven a blessing in disguise." Discuss Raami's disability, and its advantages and disadvantages during her experiences.
10. Although Raami endures so much hardship in the novel, in some ways she is a typical inquisitive child. What aspects of her character were you able to relate to?
11. Discuss how the Organization is portrayed in the novel. How does Raami picture the Organization to look, sound, and act? How do the Organization's policies and strategies evolve over the course of the novel?
12. Names have a strong significance in the novel. Papa tells Raami he named her Vattaraami, "Because you are my temple and my garden, my sacred ground, and in you I see all of my dreams." What does Papa's own name, Sisowath Ayuravann, mean? What traditions and stories are passed down through these names?
13. Consider Raami's stay with Pok and Mae. Discuss what and how both Raami and Mama learn from them, albeit differently. Do you think their stay with Pok and Mae gave them hope?
14. "Remember who you are," Mama tells Raami when they settle in Stung Khae. How does Raami struggle to maintain her identity as a daughter, a member of the royal family, and a Buddhist? Why does Mama later change her advice and encourage Raami to forget her identity?
15. Mama tells Raami after Radana's death, "I live because of you—for you. I've chosen you over Radana." Discuss Mama's complicated feelings for her two daughters. Why did Raami assume that Radana was her mother's favorite, and how does Mama's story change Raami's mind?
16. At the end of the novel, Raami realizes something new about her father's decision to give himself up to the Kamaphibal: "I'd mistaken his words and deeds, his letting go, for detachment, when in fact he was seeking rebirth, his own continuation in the possibility of my survival." Discuss Papa's "words and deeds" before he leaves the family. Why did Raami mistake his intentions, and how does she come to realize the truth about him?
17. How much did you know about the Khmer Rouge before reading *In the Shadow of the Banyan*? What did you learn?

Additional Resources

Further Reading

["Crossroads City: Phnom Penh"](#) - *National Geographic* article by Vaddey Ratner

[The New York Times](#) reviews *In the Shadow of the Banyan*

[The Wall Street Journal](#) reviews *In the Shadow of the Banyan*

[NPR interview with Vaddey Ratner](#)

Books Similar to *In the Shadow of the Banyan*

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*
- Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*
- Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*
- Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*
- Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer*

Other Books about the Khmer Rouge Regime

- *Survival in the Killing Fields* by Haing Ngor and Roger Warner
- *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* by Loung Ung

Credits

Works Consulted

www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-10684399

www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history

www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/cases/cambodia/background/an-ancient-kingdom

www.vaddeyratner.com

Works Cited

[Simon and Schuster Reading Group Guide](#)

Acknowledgments

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