

*A Cloak of Good Fortune. A Cambodian Boy's Journey From Paradise Through a Kingdom of Terror*, by Sieu Sean Do. San Francisco (CA): Hibiscus Press, 2019

By Edward Tick

"This is too much! It seems like I just get over one crisis and another occurs. I need to piece my soul together." So blurted author Sieu Sean Do's mother after the family's harrowing and narrow escape into Viet Nam from the Khmer Rouge genocide in their native Cambodia. Sieu Sean's memoir of the family's journey from an idyllic childhood in rural Cambodia through the hell of the Killing Fields is his work through witnessing and storytelling to piece his soul together.

Sieu's narrative of the family's long ordeal is largely straightforward. He was a child and teenager during these ordeals, so we see them through the innocent boy's eyes. The narrative piles incident upon incident as challenges, crises, betrayals, disappointments, abandonments, starvation, crimes, executions, and accidental deaths cascade not only upon this family, but all of Cambodia. Yet the story takes us to Cambodian traditions and intimately into his large extended family that, miraculously, survived together. As he summarizes at the end, "Our elders taught us well that we need to survive not just alone, but together." Thus, as readers we have close encounters not just with the horrors of genocide, but the intimacies of a traditional Cambodian family and many traditional practices and folk tales that surround and support the survivors in their ordeals.

In such a narrative we recognize the severe trauma survivor. Every detail matters and must be recovered. The experiences are layered upon each other with hardly any time to think about them, hardly even time to recognize the emotions or transformations they are causing. As readers, we witness the unrelenting horror perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge as they murdered 2 million of their own people. Sieu Sean registers immediate emotions, but there is no time for integration or healing, hardly enough time or energy to scrounge for food or water. As he says, he could not think about all this until it was long over. "After more than forty years since the fall of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime, we survivors of the genocide continue to be haunted by our memories."

Memories and emotions continue to surface and leak. Survivors continue to be at a loss to understand or explain how such horrors could happen, especially between people of the same background, nationality, and even family.

Sieu Sean and his family were Buddhist. Although Buddhist cultural and religious tradition invites not to dwell in the past but rather to live in the present and see that we are only a tiny part of the cosmic and historical story, by writing this narrative, he had to stretch beyond his cultural upbringing and the agonies caused by his endless travail. In this effort, we see the critical importance of storytelling as a necessary path toward healing violent trauma. To heal and come home to our own souls and each other, we must descend a second time into the darkness we survived, reclaim the memories, put our fragmented life story into a comprehensible and accurate order, and experience the emotions we could not fully allow at the time. In *A Cloak of Good Fortune*, Sieu Sean does all this.

Readers hear of an idyllic childhood, a loving extended family, a beautiful land. We learn beliefs about Buddhism, karma, and the fates of our souls. And we hear family and cultural histories, stories, and folk tales. But then the horrors come. We hear shock, confusion, fear as deprivations and abuses, arrests, and executions, forced labor and brainwashing steadily increase until the entire country becomes “a kingdom of terror.” In these conditions, traditional beliefs explain some of the unusual events the survivors experience. We hear of soul loss: “Aunt Kam’s entire body shook, and she told us later that it was as if her soul perched on top of her hair and was about to leave her body.” And we hear of ghosts: “Many Cambodians accept the fact that the soul or spirit of a dead person could appear...” and the “bad fate” that a ghost could curse the living or even leap into their bodies.

Such years of ordeal transform any survivor’s life philosophy. Sieu Sean declares that “talking could get you killed” and “death can be a reprieve from suffering.” He realizes that we are “not too different from insects... starving and craving for food.” He experiences his own and his people’s morality being suspended under these extreme conditions. People do things, like stealing or killing a pet dog for food, that they never would have done before.

Sieu Sean is also transformed in ultimately uplifting ways. He develops extreme compassion for all suffering beings – human and animal. His heart is broken open as he tries to help others he meets who are even more destitute than him. He realizes that he had become hypervigilant but that that was a necessary tool for survival. And he honors his elders, and particularly his parents, for his father’s extreme sense of responsibility, devotion, and courage

in saving the family and his mother's endurance and "warm, beautiful smile no matter how hard life was."

What are the long-term consequences after surviving such a soul-shattering ordeal? True, Sieu Sean is haunted by memories and confused about why it all happened. But his compassion and desire to serve his people and humanity expanded. After escaping Cambodia and Viet Nam, he returned some years later to discover that young people did not know anything about those years, 1975-79. He decided he had to write this book.

Many people aided his efforts, and he humbly expresses gratitude to them. Among them is author and activist Phil Cousineau, who devoted great efforts on his behalf. Says Phil, "Part of my admiration is that he has gone on to devote his life in San Francisco by working with refugees from all over Southeast Asia. Apparently, for many the wars never ceased. There is a terrible history of organized crime taking advantage of the refugees here in our own city. Bribery, extortion, etc. Sieu Sean has been selflessly helping his fellow Southeast Asians for over two decades now in the Justice Department as others helped him on his road to freedom. Currently, he is taking a break from his legal work and now spends his time volunteering at a Buddhist temple in San Francisco and is completing the next two volumes of his memoir in the hope that his story will heal others."

Sieu Sean's commitment to memorializing and helping others is noble, admirable, and healing. His life and writing demonstrate the best that comes from surviving trauma – extreme compassion for all suffering, wisdom gained from our time in the underworld, and devotion to relieve suffering everywhere and in every way he can. To return to "the kingdom of terror" a second time after living it is indeed a way to piece the soul together and offer readers and the world a close encounter that enlightens us all.