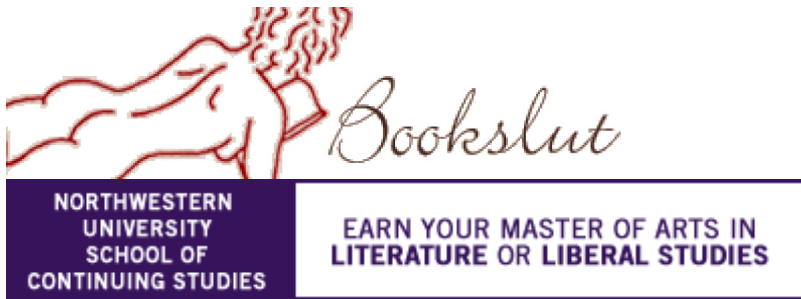


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An Interview with Loung Ung

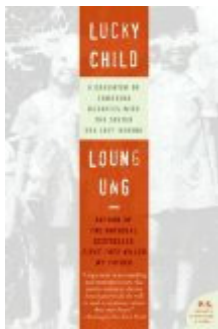


When I recently met Loung Ung in person at one of her Washington, DC readings, we were the lone Asian women in the room. Yes, get ready with your "uh-oh." Within minutes, a random stranger asked if Ung and I were sisters. Surprisingly, I behaved and politely answered with, "No, Loung and I just met." To her credit, she did promise to put her glasses back on.

I didn't embarrass my "sister," but I did later share the incident, to which she replied, "I got one almost as good." A would-be reader "asked me if I wrote the book or did I have help?" What Ung wanted to say was, "You think I no write English?" But being in a public setting (and having experienced far worse), Ung merely "got heated but stayed calm," and graciously replied with, "Yes, I wrote the book... I wrote *three* books."

Indeed, that third book is [*Lulu in the Sky: A Daughter of Cambodia Finds Love, Healing, and Double Happiness*](#), which was published in May, and completes Ung's trilogy of powerful memoirs. Above all else, Ung is a survivor -- a survivor who's managed to keep her humanity (and humor) intact in spite of enduring unspeakable atrocity. After living the first five years of her life as a privileged, pampered second-to-last daughter -- one of seven children -- in a large Cambodian Chinese family in Phnom Penh, she spent the next five years trapped in tortuous horror, trying to outrun destruction, war, starvation, and death. During her most formative years, she experienced both the unconditional devotion and courage of her family, and witnessed the most atrociously evil acts of inhumanity.

The United States' evacuation of Vietnam in April 1975 affected not only Vietnam but neighboring Cambodia and Laos where the so-called Vietnam War spread. With the U.S. troops out of the way, the Communist Khmer Rouge stormed into Cambodia's capital and largest city Phnom Penh and dispersed its inhabitants; those who survived were sent to forced labor camps where many would die of starvation, disease, torture, and execution. Over the next four years, Pol Pot and his regime claimed 1.7 million lives -- a quarter of Cambodia's then-population.



Half of Ung's immediate family somehow survived. Those horrific years -- from ages five to nine -- eventually became her debut memoir, [*First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*](#), which quickly becoming a national bestseller after it was published in 2000. Five years later, she followed that success with the critically acclaimed [*Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind*](#), in which she examines the parallel lives of her own

American experiences with those of her one surviving sister who remained in Cambodia. Ung confronts her deep guilt of being the chosen one, the "lucky child," and finds healing through love, family, and community.

In *Lulu in the Sky*, Ung is all grown up. Attending a small liberal arts college in Vermont, she begins to navigate her life as an adult, away from the "No dating, no boys" family rules she lived with from age 13. When she meets an easy-going, tall, handsome young man from Ohio, she thinks "*Kismet!* ... I, a brown girl living in the whitest state in America, met the only Caucasian person on campus who had been to my part of the world." How could she not fall in love with this happy Midwest boy who had spent a year in the Philippines teaching English in a refugee camp? Kismet indeed.

But falling in love -- even having that love abundantly returned -- is not enough to keep Ung's fears, nightmares, and bouts of depression away. For ten uncertain, peripatetic years, Ung will struggle to find peace in her soul and her place amidst her traditional family both near and far. Meanwhile, she needs to discover what fulfills her in the world, and how to reconcile the inhumanity she's witnessed with the unconditional love she's been offered.

In an essay at the end of *Lulu*, you write so poignantly, "If *First* was about getting lost, being lost, and losing, then *Lucky Child* was about being found, finding, and gaining." How might you add *Lulu* into that description?

Lulu is my journey of going from surviving to thriving... about reconnecting, reclaiming, and rejoicing.

So what's the backstory with *Lulu*? What made you write a part three?

Lulu is filled with stories about going back to Cambodia, not only as an activist but as a sister, an aunt, a daughter. I'm coming full circle from being a Chinese Cambodian, which I wrote about in *First They Killed My Father*; then becoming an American, which became *Lucky Child*; and now I'm writing about being an international citizen of the world. I've loved having all these roles.

Writing this book helped me learn so much about Cambodia on a spiritual and emotional level. It's also very much about my mother. *Lulu* came into being one morning when I woke up and found myself crying and cleaning the floor -- something I rarely do -- and something I've never done together! It took me awhile to figure out why I did that: why I was crying when I have such a great life? What I finally realized then was that in one year I was going to outlive my mother; she died when she was thirty-nine. And in my mind, I'd always thought that as long as she was alive at this age, at my age, she could exist in another place, living out her life perhaps in a parallel universe. And in this way, we could still be connected, talk to each other, be in each other's lives.

But what happens to this connection when her lifeline ends? As a daughter, I feared I would lose her all over again, so I

began to dig into her story, to learn about her life not only as my mother, my father's wife, but as a woman, a fully formed human person. The search for my mother really drove me to explore more about the role of who we are as women, who we are as part of the human race. It turned out to be a fun project that I really enjoyed. I think *Lulu* reflects this; so it's a lighter story, more hopeful, and humorous. I went into it because of pain, a delayed separation anxiety about losing my mother again. I came out of this journey full of hope and gratitude for a mother's love, the human heart, and the generosity of people to assist one another in our times of need.

In writing your own memoirs, how do you "remember"? You were only five years old when the events contained in *First They Killed My Father* unfolded, for example...

Memoir by definition is a collection of memories. [For *First*] I set out to write a story of survival for me and for my family from when I was five to nine. A lot of those memories I spent many years trying to forget, but I wasn't successful. Those memories were never silent for me. In translating the memories from my heart to my head, into print and then to book form took a lot of research, including seven trips to Cambodia and many interviews with my relatives. The book told my story, but what really brought it to life was incorporating many others' memories.

How have you responded to your detractors who question the accuracy of your young memory?

I have never put out there that this is a definitive book of history. I've never claimed that my book is anyone else's memory except my own and my family's. We all have different stories -- the world has 6.8 billion of us living individual stories! To those who disagree with mine, I tell them to put out their own story, to please share their memories, and I hope they will. This is a memoir of what happened to my family, and to me.

How have you dealt with the overwhelming feelings of rage, hate, and need for revenge that so haunted you throughout your brutal experiences?

I discovered two things in my healing process that worked. First I had to be introspective, to go inward. Through my writing, I took the horrors of war, the soldiers, the deaths that hovered over my head like dark, thunderous clouds, and pulled out one story, one scene at a time. In this way, I made sense of what happened to me, and faced what happened to me. Through writing, I named the things that haunted me, and reclaimed my power to heal my past.

Combined with going inward, I also had to go outward and figure out what to do with all that pain and horror. Because that doesn't go away, whether you've healed it, faced it, or suppressed it -- it's there in some way or some form. So you can choose to ignore it or you can work *with* the horror. For me, I chose to get involved with activism, which started in high school, and then in college. I was out there protesting the first Gulf War, working in shelters, getting involved with campaigns against land mines and child soldiers. I took all those emotions of rage and used them to fight against injustice throughout the world.

What sort of reaction might you wish from your readers?

Reading is such an amazing individual experience. I've received letters from readers who identify with my brothers, or my father, or my sister, or me. I hope most of all that they get a story of a family's love, hope, and faith.

The media bombards us constantly with horror and war -- they never show enough about the survivors and thrivers, the mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters who really make this world very special. I hope that the readers -- whomever they might connect to most -- will realize how much love was really there, that we're still holding on to each other, even though many of us are not here today.

How did your family react to the publication of your books?

They were really supportive. I came to the U.S. at age ten, got a political science degree, and had all these ideas of my

own broadmindedness given my exposure to the world and politics. In my mind, I'd hoped that my book would, in some small way, make a contribution to the betterment of our world. When I told my family about the book, I wanted to explain this view and speak to them about human rights, justice, and advocacy. But I didn't have to -- because my family said everything before I could bring any of it up. They understood these concepts even though they had hardly left the village, didn't know much about the rest of the world.

I realized then that it doesn't matter where you come from or your level of education. When there's a wrong in the world, we humans know it with or without being told, with or without some fancy degree, with or without exposure to the Geneva Convention's ruling on genocide. We humans all know when something is wrong. I was very humbled by this experience, and since then, I rarely go into places sitting on my high horse.

How often do you go back to Cambodia? What are your visits like? Do you feel "at home" when you return?

Yes, Cambodia does feel like home. I'm fluent in Khmer, and also speak fairly decent Chinese. Since immigrating here, I've been back thirty-plus times. I go maybe twice a year now. For the last twelve years, I usually go in November. It definitely feels like home. It helps to have a stomach of steel. I really don't get sick. Plus I can sleep anywhere. I have no barriers to break down when I get there.

Has communication with your family become easier with the Internet and other means of instant connectivity?

My family doesn't have Internet but now they all have cell phones. When we first started calling in 1990, the charges were \$6 per minute for a very static connection. There was only one phone in a village of 5,000 people! We would call the one person with the one phone and then hang up quickly while that person had to run and get one of my relatives, and then we would call back in 15 minutes and hope someone would be there.

Now that they all have cell phones, we can talk any time. I just called my family to wish them happy Chinese New Year. I called my sister to tell her I learned how to cook her favorite dish. Everyone in my family, even my brother Khouy, cooks. Everyone except for me! My sister has been trying to teach me to cook, and even though I hate to cook, I learned this dish only for her. So I had to call and tell her about it.

Have more family members been able to immigrate to the U.S.? Do many more want to?

My brother Kim came to the U.S. in 1999, after being in Paris. No one else has come. The rest of my family has never visited. My sister -- she's forty-four and a grandmother of two! -- would like to visit, but it's difficult. People in the U.S. think that given the opportunity, everyone wants to move here, but my Cambodian family is doing really well there, they're happy, they have everything they need. My sister has all her kids right there, many of her friends and other relatives nearby, she can walk anywhere she needs to, she can just go down the street for the exact spice she needs to make dinner. She has everything she wants right there. The only reason they want to visit is because they know Meng's life and my life are here in America.

Maybe for the sake of the kids' education, they might want to come. They would be happy to have the access to the levels of education we have in the U.S. But to go to school here as an international student takes a lot of money. How do you decide to invest in one child's education and have a family of a hundred others waiting?

What sort of reader are you? Do you read books by other Cambodian or Cambodian American writers? Do you have a preference for a certain genre?

I'm an avid reader; I've always had a deep love affair with books. Books have been my escape, my classroom, my friend. I do keep a special eye out for books by Cambodian American authors and books on Cambodia-related topics.

I love historical fiction, and science fiction, too. I have high admiration for science fiction writers especially. They have to invent the very air you breathe, they have to create everything about their faraway worlds... I felt like I was writing science fiction sometimes. So few people know anything about Cambodia, about the war, the people, the land, as if Cambodia is another world. So I tried very hard to include as many details as possible... to try and make it as visceral as possible.

***Lulu* ends in 2002. And then you left the Vietnam Veterans' of America Foundation (VVAF)'s Campaign for a Landmine-Free World project in 2003. What have you been doing since?**

After seven years in Washington, DC, I moved to Cleveland for love. I took it for all it's worth! I'm no longer working for VVAF full time, but I still continue to be involved. I'm also working with other human rights groups in Cambodia.

My husband and I recently opened Bar Cento, an Italian restaurant with another partner. I know what *al dente* means and I know what good pasta is! We also opened McNulty's Bier Markt, and our bar has one of the largest selections of Belgian beers in Cleveland. In May 2011, we opened The Market Garden Brewery, our own microbrewery. I'm loving all this. Being a businesswoman allows me to have a more flexible schedule to live the life of a writer, activist, sister, daughter, and partner.

In all these new ventures, I've also realized that to be an activist, I don't have to only work as an activist all the time. I can be an activist *and* a restaurateur, an activist *and* a writer. Anyone can be an activist and something else -- a student, lawyer, chef... Whatever you do in your life, you can continue to do *and* be an activist!

Even our restaurants are part of our activism. We use the space to host public programs, for readings and special gatherings. We use local ingredients, we support the local economy. My husband is awesome about that. He loves food, and he's a great businessman. He knows his numbers -- he could tell you how much a spoonful of olive oil costs! Besides me, his greatest love is his Excel spreadsheets!

And with all that eating and drinking, are you finding the time to write? Any sneak peeks on what you might be working on now?

I write whenever I have a free moment: at night when I can't sleep, in the morning, between epic cure dinners, and tasting beers (not conducive for good writing!). But this year, I'm giving myself the gift of time -- so I can work on my novel. Stay tuned to find out what it's about -- and if you know first, please tell me!

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