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"To transform suffering into art": Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of the Banyan*

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by Terry Hong

While the Vietnam War ended for the United States with the April 1975 military withdrawal, death and destruction continued, moving into neighboring Cambodia and Laos. With the evacuation of U.S. troops, the Communist Khmer Rouge stormed into Cambodia's capital (and largest city) Phnom Penh and dispersed its inhabitants to remote areas. In an attempt to create a more equitable society, the Khmer Rouge destroyed the majority of those who were perceived to have power, particularly the wealthy and educated. To destabilize any remaining social structures, they fractured family units. Those who managed to survive were sent to labor camps where many would die of starvation, disease, torture, and execution. Over the next four years, Pol Pot and his heinous regime claimed almost two *million* lives—a quarter of Cambodia's then-population.

Vaddey Ratner and her mother survived. No one else in their immediately family lived. Ratner was just five in 1975. Six years later, in 1981, mother and daughter arrived in the U.S. as refugees. Just over three decades later, in August 2012, Vaddey would publish *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, her fictionalized account of her young life, her missing family, and how she miraculously stayed alive while too many others did not.

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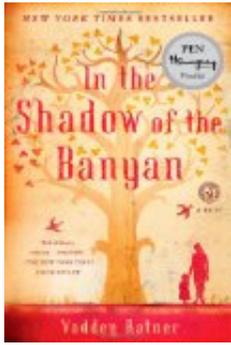
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THIS WEEK AT
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"To transform suffering into art":
Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of*



In the transcript of a speech that Ratner's Simon & Schuster editor, **Trish Todd**, gave at BEA's 2012 "Editors Buzz Panel" [to [watch](#) fast forward to 28:36 for Todd/*Banyan*], she confesses to initially believing that *Banyan* "was not a natural fit for me" when Ratner's agent first pitched Todd the novel. Intending to "honor [the agent's] submission with a nice rejection and begin my vacation," Todd—a 30-year veteran of publishing—finished the manuscript without pause (barely moving!) and realized that she "had just read

what could be the most important book [she] would ever publish." She cancelled her vacation and planned how to win the "very big auction" to buy this first novel of a new, untested writer. The rest, as they say...

The laudatory responses quickly followed. Readers made *Banyan* a *New York Times* bestseller. Critics agreed. *Banyan* was a *New York Times Book Review* Editor's Choice and appeared on eight 2012 best books lists, including *Christian Science Monitor* and *Kirkus Reviews*. The populist bibles *O Magazine* and *People* raved and recommended. The highbrows too applauded and nominated, naming it a 2013 PEN/Hemingway finalist, as well as a finalist for the 2013 Book of the Year Indies Choice Award. Ratner made the media rounds: NPR's "Morning Edition," *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*, to name a few. She spoke around the world, at the PEN/Faulkner gala, the United Nations Association, the PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature, and more.

Unlike Todd, I took over two years to finally reach the last page of *Banyan*. Not even the prospect of meeting Ratner in livetime, thanks to a mutual writer friend who insisted I join them for dinner, could get me to finish reading *Banyan*! Thankfully, the mutual friend's new book took precedence as dinner conversation. Not until this *Bloom* deadline loomed could I force myself to actually reach book's end. Why the frozen hesitation? Because I simply couldn't let the book go: holding on to the promise of unread chapters was more comforting than racing to the conclusion. I needed only a fraction of the 300 pages to realize that as wrenching and terrifying as the story is, *Banyan* would surely be one of the most heart-stoppingly gorgeous titles I would read in years. I wasn't wrong.

Ratner's fictionalized counterpart is Raami, the oldest daughter of a Cambodian prince who, with his privileged western education and reverence for his ancient culture, lives a life inspired by beauty, knowledge, and—most especially—his belief in the inherent good of humanity. These are the unassailable traits that he manages to pass on to his young daughter before

the *Banyan*

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his royal, educated background makes him an early, direct target of the Khmer Rouge. After sending Raami's father first to an unknown grave, the Khmer Rouge continues to make Raami's extended family disappear, from the beloved matriarch Grandmother Queen, to aunts and an uncle, to cousins, to Raami's toddler sister. Murder, suicide, starvation, and illness claim their shattered souls, until Raami is left only with her once delicate, pampered mother who somehow finds the steely strength to save them both.

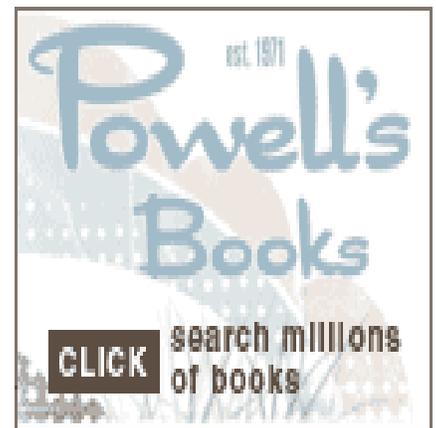
Like Raami, Ratner is Cambodian royalty. Like Raami, Ratner contracted polio as a baby, leaving a weakened leg. Like Raami, Ratner's beloved father instilled in her the beauty and—even more so—the power of words, of poetry, of story. Like Raami, Ratner's survival came at the loss of her family with the sole exception for her inspiring mother.

But rather than writing a memoir, Ratner chose to tell her story as fiction: "I did initially try to write it as a memoir," Ratner revealed in an [interview](#), but because she had been such a young child in Cambodia, she found she could not rely on her "own mostly traumatic recollections and the understandably reluctant remembrances of my mother." Any others who might have remembered were long 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.

Through the imaginative empathy that fiction allows, Ratner writes beyond the horror of what happened, and reveals the souls of those who cherished her so deeply, whom she loved with such intensity.

[*In the Shadow of the Banyan*] 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



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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.

For 35 years, Ratner's narrative fomented; each major milestone of her life moved toward the story she would eventually tell. But before she could write of her childhood, Ratner had to reach adulthood. After escaping the Khmer Rouge, another odyssey had to be endured before Ratner and her mother finally settled on the other side of the world.

Banyan ends with the surviving pair in a helicopter sent by the United Nations to take fleeing refugees from Cambodia to camps in Thailand. In real life, Ratner's "actual journey . . . was much more impeded and tortuous," she reveals in an [interview](#) for Barnes & Noble's 2012 "Discover Great New Writers" series. That said, in the refugee camp, Ratner's mother's strength never swayed. Her multilingual education made her highly valuable to the U.N.'s humanitarian efforts, especially as a translator. When they became eligible for immigration to the West as war refugees, Ratner remembers:

In France, my mother thought, we would encounter too many relatives and friends, those who had been fortunate or wise enough to leave the country before the Khmer Rouge takeover. She could not face the idea of having to explain again and again her losses, the nightmare we'd endured.

Australia was too foreign, Canada too cold. She wasn't sure if she'd even seen a picture of England. United States of America sounded perfect, she thought, because we knew absolutely no one there, and the Catholic organization that wanted to sponsor us was in some place called Missouri—"Misery," as she pronounced it. It carried the resonance of our ordeal. So Missouri it was!

Their journey continued: from Missouri, Ratner settled in Minnesota, where she would graduate high school as valedictorian, then *summa cum laude* from Cornell University with a degree in Southeast Asian literature and history. At 21, she returned to her birth country for the first time, causing her mother grave concern: she reminded Ratner how hard they had struggled to leave. But Ratner remained driven to search for any news of her beloved father, and she would return again and again. Twice she would be presented at the

Cambodian royal court of her father's relatives, and eventually, beginning in 2005, she would live once more in her homeland with her American husband and their young daughter for four years.

Cambodia for Ratner was both heaven and hell: there she had been the proverbial princess, adored and protected until she wasn't, and then she had been forced to witness some of history's worst atrocities. In that place of in-between and both, Ratner began to blend her memories with her imagination, immersed in the beauty and expanse of her recovering country; and there she began to write. She continued that literary excavation into her past after the family returned to the U.S. in 2009, settling in a Maryland suburb just outside Washington, DC. Ratner continues to maintain a home in Cambodia, perhaps as a kind of proof that lost lives have been rebuilt. After two and a half years of writing on both sides of world, Ratner had a first draft of almost 700 pages. To streamline Raami's narrative, she cut much of the historical context: "While this material may have made certain details clearer, I felt it would have diluted the child's perspective and voice. It is Raami who carries the story forward. If I weakened her voice, her innocence and intuition, the dramatic effect would be severely reduced," she explained in an interview in *The Writer*.

Ratner took "literary license to compress time and incidents, collapse places and characters . . . and alter the names and backgrounds of individuals in my family as well as those we came to know during our journey," she writes in her ending "Author's Note." "The one name I have retained is that of my father. . . . Raami's father . . . embodies my father's hopes and ideals, his fervent wish for my survival."

In writing *Banyan*, as her father's only living child, Ratner "endeavor[ed] to honor his spirit . . . to give voice to his memory, and the memories of all those silenced." Her final dedication she reserves for her mother, "who gave me life again and again. *To you, I owe everything.*"



Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book review blog for the [Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center](#).

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