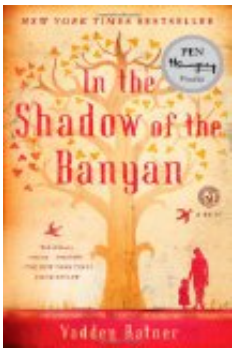
Q&A with Vaddey Ratner

Posted on March 5, 2014 by BLOOM Leave a comment

by Terry Hong



Almost two years after Vaddey Ratner made her New York Times *bestselling debut with* In the Shadow of the Banyan*—her fictionalized account of her survival, as a young child, of the Khmer Rouge genocide that took most of her family along with some two million others—her bookish peregrinations continue. I caught up with Ratner during a few days in her suburban Washington, DC, home—just back from her Norwegian book launch in Oslo and heading out to another speaking engagement in Arizona. In between the frenzy of family duties and repacking her suitcase, she graciously answered questions with acuity and alacrity . . . and alas, not without tears from us both.*

Terry Hong: Although you arrived in the United States at age 11 not speaking English, you graduated high school as valedictorian and then *summa cum laude* from Cornell. What was your career after college? In other words, what did you do before you published your first book after age 40?

Vaddey Ratner: I never had what you'd call a "career" before the publication of *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, before I became an author. I was always writing, albeit in anonymity, and in that sense, I guess I've always been a writer. In the years right after Cornell, probably the only job worth mentioning was a short stint at the Asia Society in Washington, DC, where I answered the phone and

Welcome to Bloom — where you'll encounter the work and lives of authors whose first books were published when they were 40 or older; who bloomed in their own good time.

FOLLOW US ON:

SUBSCRIBE

Click to receive notifications of new posts by email.

Subscribe to Bloom

Search …

THIS WEEK AT BLOOM

Q&A with Vaddey Ratner

"To transform suffering into art":

membership inquiries. So in short, I went from being an over-achiever to lying low, under the radar, wanting desperately to write and yet fearing what that meant—a leap back into my traumatic past, the nightmare and complicated history.

TH: Where did that inspiration and drive to be "always writing" originate?

VR: Language itself, that alchemy of illusion and allusion. My ineradicable fascination with storytelling, its magical power to transform and elucidate and even mystify.

I suppose it's safe to say that I wanted to be a writer as soon as I became aware of the written language, aware of the existence of books and the universes they contain—in other words, as soon as I learned to read and write, when I was around four or five years old. This was in Khmer, my native tongue. As a small child, I lived and breathed stories, searched for meanings in new words, in the tales I was told and the ones I overheard.

TH: How and when did you decide to write *Banyan*? And after decades of experience far-removed from Cambodia, was the process of recovering your memories difficult? How did you prepare yourself to relive such horrors in order to write this book?

VR: When I was living in Cambodia from 2005 to 2009, the realization came to me that the story I wanted to tell was larger than me, than my own life. With *Banyan*, I wanted to pay homage to our humanity—that part of us that not only survives but triumphs. I saw this everywhere in Cambodia. I still see it every time I return. Despite living in the shadow of genocide, people there possess a lightness of spirit that's absolutely inspiring.

There is no way to really prepare oneself to write this kind of book. The tragedy and atrocity were not imagined nightmares but real ordeals I lived through. So to write it, I had to relive it. Every loss I endured as a child, I endured again and again each time I sat down to write. It was a heartbreaking story to tell because I not only had to invoke the past—a country's violent history—but I had to delve into my family's personal ordeals—our private tragedies. I mourned every memory I exhumed.

From the perspective of writing as a craft, it was an excruciating first project to take on. I had no formal training as a writer and had not published a single line to be able to confidently call myself a writer by virtue of experience. Still, I knew this was *the* story I had to write before I could even think about another. No matter how long it would take me, I thought, I would discipline myself to

Vaddey Ratner's In the Shadow of the Banyan
BLOOMERS AT LARGE: "Spend Some Time Thinking"
Q&A with Ruchama King Feuerman
Publisher Spotlight: NYRB Lit in Early Bloom
Getting Started, Keeping Going: Peter Ferry's Tricks of the Trade
IN HIS OWN WORDS: Bruno Schulz

TWITTER

One #writes to make sense of things. Case in point: @VaddeyRatner's #novel 'In the Shadow of the Banyan.' bitly.com/1hB2fTo 12 hours ago

A #novel about "our struggle to hang on to life, our desire to live, even in the most awful circumstances": bitly.com/1hB2fTo 13 hours ago

Terry Hong [@SIBookDragon] talks about the way #writer @VaddeyRatner "transform[s] suffering into #art": bitly.com/1hB2fTo 14 hours ago

Follow @bloom_site

Bloom
Like 760

BLOOMERS @ THE MILLIONS

this one endeavor. After all, I'd survived those horrific events, when many in my family had not, so it was the least I could do—devote my life to remembering them.

TH: Why did you ultimately decide to capture your family's story as a novel instead of a memoir? Do you ever feel a twinge of regret that you chose fiction over nonfiction?

VR: From the very beginning I knew I wanted to tell this story in a way that would honor the lives lost and those who made monumental sacrifices to save me. While I felt it was imperative to give an accurate and honest portrayal of the atrocities perpetrated, I never wanted the horror of the Khmer Rouge to be the overriding experience readers take away. So with every description of violence or loss I painted, I labored twice as hard to bring into focus the pinprick flickers of light amidst the darkness, the small manifestations of beauty that survived the destruction, the furtive but life-embracing gestures of kindness against the blunt unthinking force of brutality.

While the historical context of *Banyan* is war and revolution, the story I wanted to tell is one of love and hope. I wrote it as a novel rather than a memoir because, with fiction, I believe I have the tool of empathy at my disposal. It allows me to be at my most compassionate because I can embody a character and see the world through his or her eyes. But, more importantly, I feel [that] my responsibility as a survivor is not to draw more attention to my own life—that I survived is itself a gift beyond words—but to *elevate* the spirit of those whose lives were cut short, those who were silenced. Survival, I feel, imposes upon me a duty to aspire, if nothing else, to greater understanding.

No, I've never felt any regret—not even a smidgen—that I wrote this as a work of fiction, given my incomplete memories, given that it wasn't *my* life I was trying to invoke but the lives that continue to live inside me, the lives that give weight and meaning to my own existence.

As a work of fiction, people come to it of their [own] accord, not because they feel compelled to "know" that history. Also, as a novel, it can be judged on its literary merits. One can say this is a good story, and it's good writing; or one can say it's absolutely bad writing, and unworthy of one's time. I want readers to have that choice. It's important to me.

TH: While writing the book, did you ever have moments of doubt, perhaps even fear, in telling such a personal, nightmarish story, especially about telling the stories of those so close to you who can no longer speak? How did you get over such hurdles? What did you do when the painful memories were

MM
THE MILLIONS
EST. 2003

Powell's Books
CLICK search millions of books

CATEGORIES

Select Category

just too much?

VR: Oh, yes, I doubted and feared every single moment I sat down to write, every word I penned! I was always reminded of what **Elie Wiesel** says—that one can never truly speak for the dead.

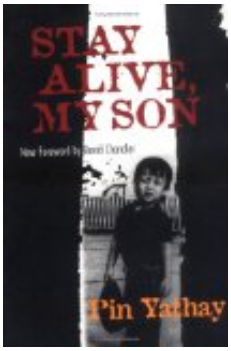
When it became too painful, too much, I despaired, I mourned all over again, I let myself sink into sorrow, and only in letting myself go and not fighting it did I then retain the energy to pull myself back from the darkness, from what felt at times like a grave where the others lay buried.

TH: Without having experienced what you did, do you think you would have become a writer?

VR: Yes, I believe I would be a writer, regardless. I think humanity would've stirred me one way or another.

TH: Poetry infuses *Banyan*. Might you be working on a poetry collection of your own?

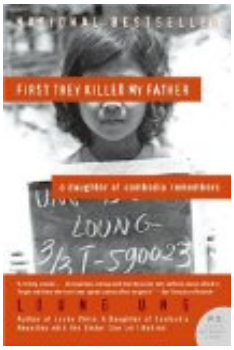
VR: You're so kind to even suggest it! Thank you! I've always felt that what I possess is only the resonance of poetry.



TH: Other Cambodian American writers have shared their stories of survival. Have you read any of these titles? What was that experience like?

VR: You might be surprised to know this, but I can't bring myself to read memoirs by other Cambodian survivors. The only one I read is *Stay Alive, My Son* [by **Pin Yathay**], in Khmer, because I wanted to feel the rhythm of our language in such a narrative. For many years I've had **Ung Loung**'s *First They Killed My Father*, but I haven't read it, and I couldn't tell her this when she wrote to congratulate me on the publication of *Banyan*. I couldn't tell her the title of her book alone made me want to weep. Though I haven't read these other stories of survival, I feel I hold them close to my heart because in essence they are my stories too. Countless Cambodians have written and told me the same—that they feel my story is theirs. We embrace one another, all of us who survived.

TH: So as a reader, you're not going to be seeking out the Cambodian/Cambodian American sections in libraries or bookstores . . .



VR: Not at all! That would make for a dangerously limited reading experience. I've endeavored to read writers across the globe and immerse myself in experiences that speak to our diverse human journeys.

TH: Do you think you might write a sequel (or sequels) about life after passing into the Thai border from Cambodia?

VR: Perhaps. We'll see…

TH: You write in your ending "Author's Note" about your 2009 visit to the Cambodian royal court, when you "brought a gift of three tons of rice as donations for the poor, in [your] father's name." That was not your first return to the land of your birth . . . when and what was your reaction upon first return?

VR: I returned the first time in January 1992, a dozen years after our traumatic escape from Cambodia, when much of the country, believe it or not, was still controlled by the Khmer Rouge rebels. While the regime had collapsed in 1979, the Khmer Rouge hadn't completely relinquished its grip, terrorizing the population with random abductions and killings and launching attacks against government forces. So you can appreciate how my mother felt about my decision to return at that particular time. "I risked everything to get you out of there," she said, her voice taut with love and fear for my safety. "Now, you are going back." But I couldn't wait until it was absolutely safe. By then, it might be too late.

In Phnom Penh, among the first things I did was to visit all the places my father and I had frequented before the war, those first few happy years of my childhood. It took me a long time to build up the courage to return to our family estate, and when I did, I found only the burnt remains of what might've been the bath pavilion. Everything else was obliterated—buried with the past.

Most devastating was relinquishing the wan hope I'd stubbornly held onto through the years that perhaps my father was still alive somewhere, somehow. Having spoken with people my mother put me in contact with—distant relatives and friends who'd survived the Khmer Rouge regime and remained in the country—it was as clear as ever that my father was gone. No one had any fragment of information on his whereabouts, not even the slight inkling that he might've survived. Still, even as I mourned him all over again, I saw him in everything that lived, that survived.

TH: Now that you've presented your father's story to the world, what is the one

thing you would want to tell him? What do you think might be his reaction to your book?

VR: I'm crying! I can barely absorb what you're asking me without choking. He will always be my love, my sorrow.

TH: Did your family ever receive any further news about your father's murder?

VR: No. Every time I'm asked this question, I must articulate the cruel, bare fact—No, I never knew what happened to him. And doing so, I feel I lose him all over again. I have to remind myself he's inside the pages of *Banyan*. He lives. His life is inseparable from mine.

TH: Your mother, as your only relative who survived the Khmer Rouge and escaped from Cambodia with you, what has been her reaction to reading *Banyan*? How have your American family members reacted? What about your Cambodian relatives? Have they read the novel, and if so, could you share some of their reactions?

VR: After reading the book, my mother said, "I thought I'd lost that child. I didn't know you'd carried her inside you all these years."

My entire family, across the globe, has been extremely supportive. For years, my mother-in-law would go around to bookstores and libraries asking for my book, even though I hadn't written it yet. She was doing this, she said, to drum up interest and excitement for when it came out.

TH: Your relationship with your mother was, because of tragic circumstances, unusually close. Having that as your model, what is your relationship with your own daughter like?

VR: My daughter and I are extremely close and tender with one another. Now that she's thirteen and taller than me, she calls me her "Munchkin Mama."

TH: Your daughter's childhood couldn't be more different from your own. How much does she know about the Khmer Rouge and genocide? When might you share your/your family's history with her? When might you share this book?

VR: She knows the gist of it—that there was a revolution in Cambodia, and that under the Khmer Rouge regime many people died. I'll share our story with her when she tells me she's ready. She asked to read the book when it first came out, and after my husband read the first few pages to her, wanting

to make sure she could take it, she decided she wasn't ready, which was perfectly all right with me. As an author, I want everyone to read my book. But as a mother, I want to protect my child for as long as I can.

TH: Have you taken your daughter to Cambodia?

VR: Yes, many times, and from 2005 to 2009, that was our home. She's grown to love it as much as I do, but she has her own relationship with it, one filled with happy memories. The first time my husband and I took her to Cambodia, she was about three, and upon seeing the country, its broken landscapes and surroundings, she exclaimed, "Mama, Cambodia is so old, like a grandpa! And there are so many echoes crawling on the walls!" She meant geckos.

TH: What other pressing stories do you feel you're harboring?

VR: A love story. My parents'. I have a wealth of material for short stories. All I need is the time!

TH: And what are you currently working on now?

VR: This second novel I'm working on is called *Music of the Ghosts*—a working title only, of course. It doesn't address the Khmer Rouge period directly but rather its reverberations in the lives of those of us who survived. It's told through alternating perspectives. While poetry knits its way through my first novel, music will give tenor to this next story about parallel loves and losses, about atonement and the possibility of forgiveness.

TH: How different do you think writing a fictional story will be in comparison to invoking, recalling, recreating *Banyan*?

VR: We'll see . . . until I'm finished [with *Music of Ghosts*], until I've gone through the entire process, I won't be able to say for certain how the challenges differ.

I can say though, for this first book, I had the overall narrative arc, knowing that I wanted to begin the story just before the revolution and end with the fall of the regime. With *Banyan*, I wanted to honor those fallen lives. My next book is about the survivors, both the victims and the perpetrators—how do we contend with the shadow of genocide? It's a much bigger canvas in terms of time and geography, and it has the additional challenge that it does not so closely parallel my own life. Among other characters, I inhabit the mind and heart of an old man, a half-blind musician. It demands a very different

approach.

TH: So you've done countless interviews over the last two years—what's the one thing you wished you had been asked? And how would you answer?

VR: Your question above about my father. That you should want to know what his reaction might be makes him so real, so touchable—not just to me, but perhaps to another as well—as if you and I had only to turn toward him, and he would be there to respond.

Click here to read Terry Hong's feature on Vaddey Ratner and In the Shadow of the Banyan.

Terry Hong writes BookDragon, a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.

Homepage photo credit: Kristina Sherk, from http://www.vaddeyratner.com

Share this:

Press This Twitter Facebook 6

Reblog Like

One blogger likes this.

Related

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

Vision and Reinvention: Julie Wu's *The Third Son*
In "Author Features"

Nina Schuyler: "Like most writers, I work at the edges of the day"
In "Author Features"

Tags: Cambodia, Elie Wiesel, First They Killed My Father, In the Shadow of the Banyan, Khmer Rouge, Music of the Ghosts, New York Times, Phnom Penh, Pin Yathay, Stay Alive My Son, Terry Hong, Ung Loung, Vaddey Ratner. Bookmark the