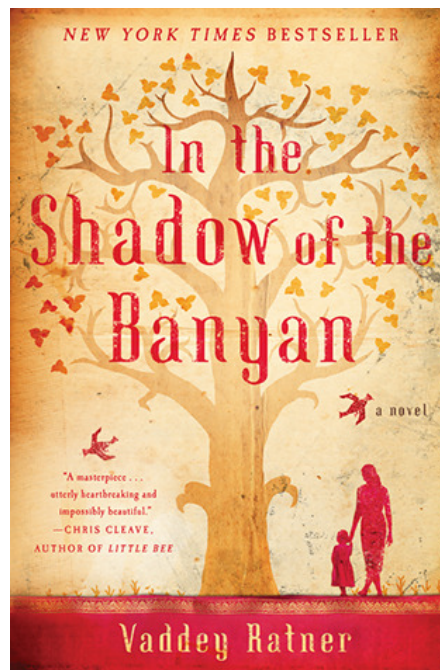




In the Shadow of the Banyan

Vaddey Ratner

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

In the Shadow of the Banyan

Vaddey Ratner

In the Shadow of the Banyan Vaddey Ratner

Displaying the author's extraordinary gift for language, *In the Shadow of the Banyan* is testament to the transcendent power of narrative and a brilliantly wrought tale of human resilience.

For seven-year-old Raami, the shattering end of childhood begins with the footsteps of her father returning home in the early dawn hours bringing details of the civil war that has overwhelmed the streets of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. Soon the family's world of carefully guarded royal privilege is swept up in the chaos of revolution and forced exodus.

Over the next four years, as she endures the deaths of family members, starvation, and brutal forced labor, Raami clings to the only remaining vestige of childhood - the mythical legends and poems told to her by her father. In a climate of systematic violence where memory is sickness and justification for execution, Raami fights for her improbable survival. Displaying the author's extraordinary gift for language, *In the Shadow of the Banyan* is testament to the transcendent power of narrative and a brilliantly wrought tale of human resilience.

In the Shadow of the Banyan Details

Date : Published August 7th 2012 by Simon Schuster

ISBN : 9781451657708

Author : Vaddey Ratner

Format : Hardcover 322 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Cultural, Asia, War

 [Download In the Shadow of the Banyan ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online In the Shadow of the Banyan ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online In the Shadow of the Banyan Vaddey Ratner

From Reader Review In the Shadow of the Banyan for online ebook

Connie says

It sends chills through me when I think about the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge when they gained control in Cambodia in 1975. Vaddey Ratner wrote a fictional story that was based on her family's actual experiences.

Raami was a seven-year-old girl living a life of privilege as the daughter of a prince. Her father was a poet who loved telling her traditional fables, which emotionally helped her after she had polio as a one-year-old. Her father told Raami, "When I thought you couldn't walk, I wanted to make sure you could fly."

The story starts off slowly as it shows the family's life as royals. There was mass confusion when the Khmer Rouge came into power, and intellectuals and royals were marked for extermination. The Khmer Rouge forced people out of their homes. They were sent to work in the rice paddies, or off to dig earth and stones to form huge dams to hold back the water from the monsoons. The people were starved, tortured, and killed. The survivors were dealing with the grief of losing their loved ones. The story of Raami's family keeps picking up pace--and increasing in terror--until Raami is mute and near starvation before they finally escape.

The author was only five-years-old in 1975, and she escaped into Thailand four years later with her mother. They arrived in the United States in 1981, and she became a high achieving student. Vaddey Ratner writes in a beautiful lyrical manner. It must have taken great courage to relive this experience in her mind as she was writing this book.

Thomas says

As a senior in high school, it scares me that I didn't know how to properly pronounce "Khmer Rogue" before reading this book. Even worse was my ignorance of Cambodia's history in the late 1970's - the genocide that took place serves as a lesser-known Holocaust, the horrors these people endured similar to that of the Jews.

In the Shadow of the Banyan follows seven-year-old Raami as she witnesses the communist regime take everything away from her. Through her eyes Vaddey Ratner displays the evocative environment of Cambodia as it is torn asunder by the Khmer Rogue. Raami and her family are forced out of their home and into a world of brutal labor and starvation. She fights to survive, even as she loses her family members one by one.

As one might expect when reading a book about Auschwitz or the Holocaust, getting through Ratner's work was a painful trial due to the extent of human suffering portrayed. While Raami's narrative could be a bit dry at times, it never falters, taking into account all the details and stories one would expect from a child. That this book acts almost as the author's account of her own childhood in Cambodia makes it even more touching and bittersweet.

Overall I recommend this book for those interested in a story of human sorrow, hope, and beauty, all delineated through the perspective of an insightful and honest seven-year-old girl.

*review cross-posted on my blog, the quiet voice.

Julie Christine says

To render historical, political fiction in the voice and through the eyes of a young child, a writer sets herself a tremendous challenge and takes on great risk. Children are naturally fanciful, unreliable creatures - not dishonest, but only able to offer the truth as their immature brains can grasp and explain it. When the story is revealed as the author's own, the reader feels compelled to accept a fictionalized account as mere degrees of separation from the truth.

What Vaddey Ratner has accomplished with her striking and lovely *In the Shadow of the Banyan* is a tone poem. Its outline is based on the atrocious Khmer Rouge regime, but the narrative floats on themes of family, mythology and the deadly beauty of the author's homeland. The nanny of the story's narrator, Raami - the author's mirror character - says it best when she declares that stories "are like footpaths of the gods. They lead us back and forth across time and space and connect us to the entire universe."

In the Shadow of the Banyan is a story that connects us to Cambodia's recent past and the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge during the late 1970's. Because we are seeing the events unfold through the eyes and within the heart of a seven-year old girl, we are twisted and wrenched by a child's vulnerability and hope but spared the most gruesome details of torture and obliteration. In many ways this is a grace, for it allows us to focus on the child's small world of her privileged family and their servants without being overwhelmed by the incomprehensible horror of Cambodia's civil war. But it also renders some characters shadowy and incomplete and glosses over context that would have helped create a firmer narrative.

Although the book jacket declares the novel covers the four years of the Khmer Rouge regime, the action is heavily concentrated on the first days and weeks after the capture and exile of Raami's family. The first half of the book is a near moment-by-moment recount of the first weeks after the Khmer Rouge declares a new state on April 17, 1975. The second half chronicles the splitting apart of Raami's family as one relative after another is slaughtered outright or dies as a result of their enslavement. There is a reference to the second anniversary of the Revolution and to Raami's ninth birthday. The book's final pages mention the war between Vietnam and Cambodia and the retreating Khmer Rouge armies, so it must end in the early weeks or months of 1979. This is significant to me because I feel the details invested in the early parts are tedious at times, whereas the shifts of time and events in the latter third of the novel, as Raami ages and suffers and grows as a refugee in her own homeland, are given broad, vague brushstrokes.

Ultimately, however, it is a book I feel honored to have read. Ratner's language is lyrical and stirring; she creates gorgeous and vivid portrait of Cambodia, filling the reader with longing to see, hear, taste, and touch a vibrant, complex land. It offers a unique perspective into a history and culture little or mis-understood in the West and I hope other readers have the same reaction as I - of wanting to know more, to read more, to hear other survivors' stories - in an effort to understand and to humanize the newspaper headlines.

My husband, as a teacher of high school history and social studies, received a Fulbright grant and spent several weeks in Southeast Asia a few years ago. Cambodia and Vietnam, in equal measure but for different reasons, touched him to his core. Vietnam's recent history he was, of course, more familiar; U.S. history books treat Cambodia's chaos as a post-script to the "American" War (as the Vietnam War is referred to in Southeast Asia). When you begin to fully grasp a reality that is little mentioned in our own history books, it's a horrible slap in the face - a sensation of guilt and anger that in your ignorance, you are somehow complicit. It is through the gift of authors such as Vaddey Ratner that these stories are told so we all can wake up and learn.

loretta says

In 1975, when my own daughter was 7 years old, the Khmer Rouge overthrew the government of Cambodia and the life of 7 year old Raami was forever changed.

'In the Shadow of the Banyan' is an exquisitely written book about that dark time in history. From 1975-1979, the country's people endured incomprehensible horror and systematic genocide. 1975 is no longer- the revolutionaries have declared it Year Zero.

When Raami and her family are ousted from their home, they begin the trek which will take them on a journey of wrenching agony and tears. This first uprooting will be the first among many in which they will lose family, friends and belongings. Each 'leaving' is a leaving of love, of memories-the things that tie them to their past.

Raami has grown up in a family of privilege, of royal lineage and she has this very close bond with her father who is a just, caring, gentle man. He tells her stories and teaches her about the beauty of the natural world. He tells Raami that the reason he told her so many stories was: "to give you wings". He tells her that his greatest desire is to see her live. "When I lie buried beneath this earth, you will fly. For me Raami. For your papa you will soar." At a time when Raami feels she can endure no more, it is these words she remembers. It is these words that give her the will to go on.

The story is heartbreaking and painful but the authors ability to intersperse beauty amidst the horror allows the reader to continue reading what would otherwise be unbearable. It is a testament to Vaddy Ratner's inner strength and resilience that she has written a story that requires her to re-live this period of her life so that her family's struggle, as well as all those who also endured might live on. she is their voice. She has written a beautiful, haunting novel that will not, nor should be, soon forgotten.

Carol says

In the Shadow of the Banyan will be published August 7th by Simon & Schuster. My sincere thanks for the opportunity to read this in e-galley format.

With a poetic voice, Ratner plunges us into this personal trial of a royal family wrenched from their home in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, during the late seventies; a time of revolution. Robbed of her childhood, the narrator, seven year old Raami, brings us on this horrific displacement as she and her family endure homelessness, hunger, hard labor and the death of loved ones in the 4 years the story depicts.

Though Raami's story which parallels with Ratner's own could easily leave my heart weighted down with sorrow, the beauty of Ratner's writing and the brilliancy of the human spirit manages to leave me with hope.

In the end what struck me most about *In the Shadow of the Banyan* was that the imagery of this fictional memoir mirrors a truth that is far worse. *In the Shadow of the Banyan* is a moving debut and a must read.

Karen says

I visited Siem Reap as part of a 3 week trip to Southeast Asia in April 2012. I found the people of Siem Reap to be kind, warm, friendly and incredibly interested in America. When we would tell them we are from the DC area (Potomac MD) they wanted to know more. The country is rebuilding at break neck pace, but in its midst are children who don't go to school and are put to work to help the family earn money. My daughter paid what they considered to be a "hefty fine" at the border because she didn't have the requisite number of empty pages left in her Passport. It was about 20 American dollars. Don't want to wait in line to get your Passport stamped? American dollars will move an official to move you to the front of the line. Extortion, lack of education enforcement, lack of modern tools to build a modern infrastructure, abandoned children are the remnants of how the country was ravaged. Visiting Siem Reap piqued my curiosity in going back and studying the Khmer Rouge and the history of the Killing Fields. This book nearly destroyed me. It is a beautifully crafted book that is horrifying regardless of how hard Ms. Ratner tried to show the beauty that she remembered. I would love to go back to Cambodia, but this time I want to hear their stories.

Nancy says

*“They say mine is a ravaged land,
Scarred and broken by hate-
On a path to self-extermination,
Yet no other place
So resembles my dream of heaven.
The lotus fields that cradle my home.
Each flower a reincarnated spirit-
Or perhaps, like me,
A child who wishes to be reborn
Should dreams become possible again.
It's true mine is a life of poverty
My home a half-built thatched hut,
Its walls the winds and rains.”*

In *The Shadow Of The Banyan* is a remarkable work of fiction based on the author's real life experiences and family members. It takes place in Cambodia during the reign of the Khmer Rouge. Born in Phnom Penh, the author's father was a member of nobility and an intellectual. While they questioned the inequity of their culture, the coup of 1970 developed into an equally corrupt system. People were forced into labor camps, starved and executed. Families separated. The vision of a socialist utopia had turned in to a form of genocide. Anyone perceived as an enemy of the state was systematically removed. Overthrown by the Vietnamese in 1979, an estimated third of the population had died.

Vaddey Ratner worked such a significant number of parallels into her novel that in my humble opinion it is more a memoir. She suffered from polio and lost her father among other things. Without giving away the story, a reader should be prepared for the brutality and loss. The main character Raami survives in part through the transforming nature of her father's poetry and stories. And Ratner's writing is as lyrical and laden with metaphors.

When her father's royal status is discovered, he basically sacrifices himself to their captors. In trying to explain to his daughter why he's leaving, he says, *“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. Yes its true, everywhere you look there is suffering – an old man has disappeared, a baby died and his coffin*

is a desk, we live in the classrooms haunted by ghosts, this sacred ground is stained with the blood of murdered monks. My greatest desire is to see you live. If I must suffer so that you can live, then I will gladly give up life for you, just as I once gave up everything to see you walk.”

In my first years teaching in MN in the mid 70’s, I lived in an old 3-story six-plex whose bottom apartments were rented by a local church to house the Cambodians they sponsored. The family who lived underneath me had a little girl about Raami’s age. I remember with horror the stories they told about losing all they owned in the revolution, the forced labor, the beatings, escaping through the rice paddies at night, threats of cutting off fingers when the Khmer Rouge couldn’t get rings off, months and years in refugee camps. This book brought back lots of memories.

Jill says

It is a few hours since I turned the last pages of this haunting and powerful novel, and I am still trembling from its nearly unbearable power. Such is the power of Vaddey Ratner’s story telling.

And it is story telling that is at the core of this book. At one point, Ms. Ratner reflects, “A story, I had learned, through my own constant knitting and re-knitting of remembered words, can lead us back to ourselves, to our lost innocence, and in the shadow it casts over our present world, we begin to understand it.”

Her story is as universal as mankind, and yet uniquely her own. The story has been told – in varying ways – by Carolina De Robertis in *Perla*, by Naomi Benaron in *Running the Rift*, by Thomas E. Kennedy in *In The Company of Angels*, by William Styron in *Sophie’s Choice*. It is as old as the hills, man’s inhumanity to man, the brutishness, cruelty and sheer sadism of those who inflict damage in the name of an evil cause.

In Ms. Ratner’s capable hands, this familiar story rises to sheer poetry as she not only survives, but also transcends. In it, she inhabits her younger muted self and gives her a voice. (In an epilogue, we learn that details have been changed but her character’s story is, in essence, her own). Raami – the little girl who speaks for Vaddey Ratner – is only seven when her world shatters; the infamous Khmer Rouge comes to power, destroying her innocence, her youth, and her family.

What ensues is achingly real and beautifully realized. We follow Raami as she undergoes the ultimate in heartbreak, deprivation, loss, and sadness as the Khmer Rouge endeavors to destroy the last sparks of individuality and humanity. Yet even the worst humiliations cannot break her spirit; she clings to hope through the power of story telling and through small gestures of kindness.

This impossibly brave author ended up in the United States after four years of forced labor and starvation and went on to graduate Cornell University, *summa cum laude*. Just as her father – a gentle poet – offered her wings, so she offers those wings to her readers. I cannot imagine how anyone could read this book and not be incredibly touched.

Tania says

I didn't know so much sadness could exist in so small a place

This must be one of the most exquisitely written books I've read in a long time. It's based on the authors own experience during the regime of Cambodia's Khymer Rouge. There is a few things that stands out and makes this different to other war/genocide books I've read. Firstly, the first part of the book is very slow and focuses on the beauty rather than the impending horror. At first I didn't understand, but closer to the end I realize that this is the way children see things. They are extremely adaptable, and as long they still believe that their immediate family is save, they think that they are protected and that nothing bad will happen. Especially as Raami had a very protected childhood before the war. The second differentiating factor was that the author really shows in detail how you can lose your life and everything that you love in an incremental way, and not in one big event. The war itself was also fascinating, I've never read anything about the Cambodian war/genocide, in fact I've never even heard of it before. If you enjoyed The Sandcastle Girls then this if for you.

Didi says

I read In the Shadow of the Banyan at the beginning of the month. It took me three and a half days to read but then plunged me into a week + worth of thought. We're nearing the close of the month of May and I still can't get this book off my mind. I figure my reading for the month of May was all worth it because I had the pleasure of experiencing my second 5 star book of the year 2014. Now if you've been following me here or over at frenchiedee you know that I absolutely don't have a habit of giving out 5 star ratings.

In the Shadow of the Banyan is the fictionalised story of Vaddey Ratner's four-year ordeal living through the genocide that took place in Cambodia once the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975. The main character is called Raami and she is seven years old when the story begins. The first few chapters we are introduced to her family and their lifestyle. They are a wealthy and privileged family. They are a royal family in Cambodia and her father is a poet as well. Soon there after we learn that the Khmer Rouge have taken over the country and are driving the population from the city to the countryside. There they are made to work in the rice paddies, surviving on little food. The Khmer Rouge are enforcing Marxist philosophy on the population and forcing them to forget life as it was before. People of privilege, professors, scientists, teachers, artists, musicians, etc. are hunted down and killed. They are perceived as enemies to the Organization.

This story is more than just a retelling of a historical event and of Ratner's experience. It is a story of human survival. One wonders how they would behave if they had to go through such a situation. I thought through it so much and feel as though I would have caved in and hoped for a swift death. Ratner shows the limits of human beings and how survival is not necessarily dictated by what one may think. Raami thinks a lot of her father, the things she remembers that he said to her, and of his poetry. Sometimes it's the simplest things that can help someone to survive.

The writing in In the Shadow of the Banyan is absolutely beautiful! That Ratner could write such beautiful prose about such a blight on Cambodian history and on her family is remarkable. Since we see this story through the eyes of a seven year old, things are recounted with much detail. This detail may be perceived as wordy but I assure you that it is not the case. The descriptions are there so that we as readers are literally transported to Cambodia. We see, feel, and taste what Raami describes. There were passages that were difficult to read, but Ratner's writing becomes a metaphor for the insidious behaviour of the Khmer Rouge. In the beginning the people don't understand what is happening to them but quickly things change and they realise they are trapped in horror. Even Raami develops over the 410 pages tremendously. In the beginning, she is naive young and joyful despite her handicap, but her character development is portrayed with the right flow of the story.

Another interesting aspect of this story is the relationship between mother and daughter in such a traumatic

life/death event. Their relationship at the beginning of the story seems fairly undefined but thrown into the uncertainty of this historical event, mother and daughter learn a lot about each other and marvel over each others' strengths. This is one of the most touching parts of the story. I just can't gush enough over this novel. It's a must read. Pick this one up because you won't regret it.

Sonja Arlow says

This semi-autobiographical novel is based on the invasion of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia during the 1970's. Although it contains beautifully graphic descriptions of scenery and the Cambodian folklore I really struggled to connect with this book.

The story was told mainly in metaphorical flowery prose by a narrator whose voice didn't ring true. No 7 year old child, no matter how precocious, could remember so much detail or draw such poignant connections and observations of her surroundings. Perhaps if the book was written in the form of an adult looking back it would have felt more authentic.

I did however enjoy the Author's Note at the end of the book about her actual experience during this horrific time. It outlined what the Khmer Rouge occupation which made me understand the severity of the situation. I am still trying to figure out exactly why I did not enjoy this book (besides the issues I had about the narrator).

This past year or two I have been fascinated and drawn to books exactly like this but for some reason it never captured my attention even though I so desperately wanted to love this book.

Chrissie says

I finished this last night. Yes, it was well done. Probably the reason I liked it was that it is based on the author's experiences, from which she has crafted her novel. I thought the end was better than the beginning. The end very well depicted the horrors and the supreme idiocy of the Khmer Rouge regime. The tamer beginning reflects the innocence of the young girl, which is not inappropriate. She was at the beginning only seven! In reality, the author was only five.

The traditional Cambodian culture and Buddhist beliefs are adroitly interwoven into the events. There are beautiful stories told, all part of the native culture.

This book can more accurately be described as a story about the author's father seen through the eyes of his beloved child, the author. His name is not changed in the novel. He was a Cambodian prince, a man of high ideals, a poet and man of much wisdom. His wisdom is not based on merely book knowledge, but rather a deep, morally sound understanding of people.

This is both a philosophical novel (remember those stories) and a historical novel.

The narrator, Greta Lee, easily read both the untranslated native language and English. The young daughter is telling of her experiences from 1975 through to 1979, when the Vietnamese entered the country, squashing the Khmer Rouge, freeing the Cambodians. The narrator does sound like a young girl - not an easy task when describing such horrendous events perpetrated by the "Revolutionary Soldiers"!

This is the book to choose if you want to read about the Khmer Rouge and what they did 1975-1979. Well done, a splendid mix of a moving story that will pull your heart strings and give you the historical details too.

Oh, and there is a good author's note at the end!

b bb bbbb bbbbbbbb says

This is interesting and somewhat informative as a semi-autobiographical narrative of living through the khmer-rouge takeover of Cambodia in the 70's. As a novel it doesn't fare so well. I found myself skimming most chapters to extract an ok story from a swamp of flowery prose. The content-to-fluff ratio is about 1:3 most of the time, with occasional stretches of more focused story telling. It's not bad fluff as the stuff goes, and if it's your kind of thing then it may heighten your appreciation for the book.

The only other downside is the dubious perspective that it's natural and right for royalty to be elevated above and fawned over by a population. This is likely an unconscious slip since the author makes a couple overt attempts to promote the opposite idea. Those scenes are not convincing and the undercurrent running through the book as a whole undermines them. It's also a little awkward at the end when the author parades her own position as royalty under the guise of honoring her father (a slain prince).

If there were half stars, this would be 1.5 material.

Martha says

This novel was slow going for me. This was a story the author admits is pretty much her own, of a childhood derailed and torn apart by the Revolution in Cambodia in the 1970s. As a sheltered and privileged child, she and her family are particularly vulnerable and very much unaware of what is brewing around them as they are evacuated from Phnom Penh and sent off to become farm laborers. Maybe it's just that she writes it a little too carefully, hanging on to people and moments a beat too long, fleshing them out with a little too much poetry, but I found her voice to be much more mature than seemed possible for a child narrator, even one who had to grow up fast in a matter of months. So as fascinating as I found the story to be, I wish the child had told the story as a child or that the adult that child became had told it from a more mature point of view. But I was grateful to read this story, this inside view of a place and time where idealism and reality showed different faces and very little of it seeped out into the world until long after so much damage was done and so many lives were lost.

Rose says

How can a book break your heart & make your heart soar all at once? How can certain passages be of a horrific nature & yet be written in such a beautiful way that you must go back & re-read them? I don't know how, but this book does that. A story about the Cambodian genocide and all the tragedies that came from the Khmer Rouge coming into power in 1975, it is nonetheless a beautiful book. The subject matter is heartbreaking & disturbing, reading about the true evil some people possess always is, but it's also a story of the strength of spirit & the endurance of love between people & the truly remarkable way people have of surviving the most terrible tragedies imaginable. That the story was told through the eyes of a 7 year old worked for me because it was written extremely well & though Vaddey Ratner wrote about her own

experiences & drew the main character of Raami after her own self it followed more of a literature format than a memoir and this is what makes this book stand out from others that may be similar in subject matter. There were some truly beautiful moments in this story, words that swirled around your mind as you read them & enchanted you. I loved Ratner's inclusion of a love for poetry & words from 2 of the main characters, their love of stories, it was a beautiful connection between them & as an avid reader you can't help but connect to those feelings. I hope this author hurries up & writes something else because I'll be first in line to read it.

Diane S ? says

The killing fields of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge in power from 1975-1979 before the Vietnamese drove them out, by this time one to two million Cambodians were either killed, starved to death or committed suicide. Raami is seven, her father a prince and a poet who has instilled in her a love for stories and words, which he told her would give her wings and allow her to see the beauty in even the ugliest things. a the start of this, when they are herded into the streets and taken from camp to camp, they are a family of nine, by the end only 2 will survive. Told entirely from the viewpoint of Raami, this book and the way it is told has a poignancy and yet a strange beauty too as it is not only about a horrible revolution but about the strong bond and love between a father and daughter. This is in fact the authors own story, though she was only 5 when the actual revolution happened, and as she explains in the afterward she writes this book to honor her father and those who never made it through this horrific time. This book is beautiful;y written, my only question is would a seven and eight yr. old have the capacity to relate all these things she had seen? I decided that what she did;t understand at the beginning, after everything she sees and experiences, she would have grown up relatively quickly so I think that this is entirely plausible. Great book and one I would definitely recommend.

ARC from NetGalley.

Nina (Every Word A Doorway) says

***In the Shadow of the Banyan* is a semi-fictional debut written by a survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. This is a touching but devastating tale of power, family, and survival.** I saw this book at a store, having never heard of its existence before. No one had recommended this to me. No shop assistant had pointed me in its direction. I stumbled across this beautiful, heart-felt debut by chance, and I'm glad I did.

"First and foremost, I wanted to honour the lives lost and those who made monumental sacrifices to save me."

– Vaddey Ratner

Considering that Ratner began to learn English as an 11-yr old, the exquisite prose is all the more impressive. The East-Asian setting was brought to life with delicate wording, though some passages may have been overly descriptive for my taste. **The beautiful writing clashes with the horrifying content – escape, hunger, and bloodshed.** The story is told from the view of Raami, a young girl who had grown up in a noble family until the first days of war shattered her peaceful childhood. Knowing that the author had probably experienced many of the events described in the book herself made the content all the more gut-

wrenching. To me as a reader, it made no difference whether I was reading from Raami's or Vaddey's point of view, as biography and fiction probably blur seamlessly in *In the Shadow of the Banyan*. **Though the narrator's voice was a bit too mature for a child of this age, the direct thoughts and actions were those of a young girl nonetheless.**

For me, this book holds importance due to many of us in our little tourist bubbles have forgotten what horrors Cambodians experienced during the Khmer Rouge regime. The Khmer Rouge, a nationalist movement blooming in the shadow of a communist party, were responsible for orchestrating a Cambodian genocide. During their reign, members of the former Cambodian government, intellectuals, and ethnic minorities were tortured and executed. **As a descendant of King Sisowath, Vaddey Ratner's – and therefore also Raami's – royal name, which had once meant protection and comfort, marked them for death during the Khmer Rouge reign.** Ratner's childhood during the regime consisted of forced labour, starvation, and near execution. The despair of a child caught in the web of war is well reflected through the suffering of Raami.

During the years of hardship, Raami's only source of hope are her father's stories and poems about courage and resilience. Words are an important tool of survival in this book.

"Words, you see," he said, looking at me again, "allow us to make permanent what is essentially transient. Turn a world filled with injustice and hurt into a place that is beautiful and lyrical."

The aim of this book wasn't to report the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge and the horrors witnessed by the Cambodian people. Rather, *In the Shadow of the Banyan* sends a powerful message of love, sacrifice, and clinging to hope in the darkest moments.

Ellen says

Based on the author's experiences as a young child in the Khmer Rouge's Cambodia in the 1970's, this novel contrasts the worst in human behavior with the astonishing ability to dream of better times. Despite loss and starvation, forced labor and wanton cruelty, young Raami never gives up her belief in the power of stories to save us, the power of words as wings.

One thought, and I wonder if any other readers had this reaction. I really enjoyed reading this book, although enjoyed is not quite the right word - more accurately, I appreciated reading it. But I kept wondering about the author's decision to tell the entire story from the first person point-of-view of a child. On the one hand, the child's innocence balances the horror of the facts. On the other hand, I craved a more layered perspective, a more complex telling. I kept wishing, odd as it may sound, for a glimpse into the inner world of one of the Khmer Rouge "organization" believers. But that's just me, I guess...

I keep going back and forth between three stars and four; three and a half!

Jennifer Rayment says

The Good Stuff

Heartbreaking - this story will haunt you long after you have read it
The prose is so exquisite and beautifully written, such talent for first time author
It is hard for me to express how spectacular this book is, everything I want to say sounds trite when compared to the beauty of the authors words and the horror she lived through
Raami is such a strong girl, one to be admired for her strength of character and her ability to transcend the horrific tragedy she lived through and to still find beauty in her world.
As the author says in her own words she wants the world to see how beautiful Cambodia was before the genocide & which while reading you come to understand what was lost during the "killing fields"
Shows the will that we have to live no matter the circumstance
The writing really comes across of that of a young girl, so authentic and haunting
Such joy love and hope in such a tragic situation gives a balance to the acts of brutal violence by the Khymer Rouge - shows that the world is full of both good and evil
Author mentions on quite a few occasions the power of stories to escape and to give hope (Wonderfully explained on Pg 134 of the ARC)

The Not So Good Stuff

It is a tough read for someone as sensitive as myself. Reading of the brutality and inhumanity of man sickens me and I cannot even comprehend how or why someone could commit such horrific crimes against their fellow man, especially to innocent children
Pages 125 - 127 (ARC) were brutal for me to read, being a mother

Favorite Quotes/Passages

"But, looking at the murals, I had the feeling the tales had followed us here, moving along with us on our journey, manifesting themselves in all sorts of ways.

Knowing comes from learning, finding from seeking.

It was clear what the message meant. If I looked hard enough, if I sought, I would find what I was looking for."

"I'm certain, though, he remained resolute in his belief that even without him you would live through this nightmare, that life, with all its cruelty and horror, was still worth living. A gift he would've wanted his daughter to embrace."

"Bury me and I'll thrive as countless insects

I bend neither to your weapon nor will

Even as you trample upon my bones

I cower not under your soulless tread

Or fear your shadow casting upon my grave."

"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."

Who Should/Shouldn't Read

This is one I would suggest for everyone to read with a warning for those who are sensitive

This will be an award winner, so get it now people

4.75 Dewey's

I received this from Simon and Schuster in exchange for an honest review - thanks for once again forcing me out of my comfortable reading zone

Sarah says

In preparation for our trip to Cambodia and the Killing Fields near Phnom Penh I read three books: *In the Shadow of the Banyan* by Vaddey Ratner, *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung, and *When Glass Floats* by Chanrithy Him. Each of the three books was about a young girl who, with their families, suffered under the Khmer Rouge communist regime and their genocide campaign.

The Khmer Rouge took control of Phnom Penh, its last obstacle to ruling all of Cambodia, on April 17th, 1975. They turned the cities into ghost towns, evacuating or killing the city dwellers and forcing their populations into the countryside. They nullified the monetary system, making them all destitute. And systematically executed all those in the former government and military, the teachers, the doctors, the religious leaders, and any they viewed as intellectuals...sometimes just because they wore glasses. All this was done to satisfy Pol Pot's dream of turning Cambodia into an agrarian state isolated from Western influence. But, this was just the beginning of the Khmer Rouge atrocities. When the country was liberated from the regime in January of 1979, an estimated 2 million Cambodians had suffered death under the regime. Almost an entire nation was orphaned.

Both *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung and *When Glass Floats* by Chanrithy Him are autobiographical. *In the Shadow of the Banyan* was such a different reading experience from the other two because it was a novel steeped in poetic prose. The protagonist, Raami, is still based on the author and Raami's struggles mirror the struggles of Ratner but the novel format allowed Ratner to tell her story in a much different voice.

"Words, you see," he said, looking at me again, "allow us to make permanent what is essentially transient. Turn a world filled with injustice and hurt into a place that is beautiful and lyrical. Even if only on paper." (pg 106)

"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." (pg 134)

If you are only going to read one of the three, I'd honestly read *First They Killed My Father*, but if you are going to read two or all three, I'd recommend reading this novel first. It is filled with Cambodian tradition and stories that will give you a sense of the spirit of this people before humanity was taken from them. Through this coming of age story, Raami was able to see the violence and suffering around her without losing her ability to find the words that would give her wings.
