

First They Killed My Father

A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers

By Loung Ung

Exploring the text -Major Themes of the Book-

Pages 1 – 22 tell of Loung Ung's childhood memories of Phnom Penh.

Pages 23 – 213 tell of her family's experiences during the Khmer Rouge dictatorship.

Pages 214 – 272 are of Cambodia during the invasion by Vietnam.

Pages 283 – 303 relate how Loung was able to make her way from Cambodia, through Vietnam to Thailand, and finally to America.

Before the Khmer Rouge takeover:

- In the first two chapters Loung Ung describes herself as a child. What sort of a child was she?
- How many people are in Loung's family? Name them.
- What sort of a family are the Ungs? Are they very different to you? If you have brothers and sisters do they resemble the children in the Ung family?
- Would you have liked to have lived in the Phnom Penh Loung describes? Why?

Under the Khmer Rouge:

- Loung interprets the flight from the capital as she experienced it: "Yesterday I was playing hopscotch with my friends. Today we are running from soldiers with guns." What has happened? Does Loung understand why she and her family have been forced from their home? How does she react to the forced march?
- Loung's parents are questioned about what work they did before the takeover. Why do they lie and what were their real occupations?
- All the men who had registered for work were shot. Why?
- Loung is very happy when her family obtains a small pot of brown sugar. Why? How much of it does she eat?

Life in the country:

- What are "base people"? What is a "Khmer"? Are Loung and her family Khmer?
- "All remnants of past lives to be destroyed". What does this mean?
- The Khmer Rouge attempted to change the spoken language by banning words like Mr and Mrs, Sir and Lord, mother and father. Why did they do this?
- Under the Khmer Rouge all people are equal. Or are they? How many levels of society are there in the village? Discuss.
- Kim has made some new "friends" in the village. Who are these children? How do they treat Kim? Discuss.

Loung's family:

- Loung's sister Keav is separated from the family and sent to a labor camp. Loung says, "Now the joy of beauty is gone from her life." What was Keav's life like in Phnom Penh?
- Where is Keav when she dies? Are there any doctors in the hospital? Why not?
- "Pa straightens his shoulders, and for the first time since the Khmer Rouge takeover, he stands tall." Why has Loung's father recovered his dignity?
- Kim is stealing corn to keep his family alive. In the fields the plants are heavy with corn. Loung imagines that her brother asks a question: "Why are the killers starving us when all this is available?" Is there an answer?

The family separates:

- Who are the "Youns"? What are they doing?
- The children's mother turns them out of home. She says, "I don't want you here. You are too much work for me! I want you to leave!" When this happens Loung's blood "boils with resentment" towards her mother. Why has she acted this way? Do you think Loung's attitude is justified? Imagine yourself in Loung's position. How would you feel?
- Loung and her sister wish to join a children's work camp. Why? What does "Met Bong" mean. At night Met Bong "educates" the children. How? What does she want the children to do?
- At a new camp site Loung Ung sees a young boy up a palm tree cutting fruit: "He smiles and waves to me, but the cleaver is still in his hand." Is this the first time the author has noted a smile since the Khmer Rouge takeover? Is the image one of warmth and friendship or does the author wish to convey a warning?
- Who is Pol Pot? Why are children being forced into the army? What are the children being taught about their parents?

Orphans:

- In some parts of the book Loung Ung chooses to use *italics* to tell her story. Why does she do this?
- What has happened to Cambodia? What is the political discussion about?
- The family is reunited. How many family members set out on their journey in April 1975. How many of them are there now? What happened to Meng and Khoy?
- "Eight weeks, sixty days, 1,400 hours more, and she would have made it." Loung describes herself as being angry and resentful towards her mother. Why?

Leaving Cambodia:

- When Loung is being smuggled by boat from Vietnam to Thailand another boat intercepts them. Their captain tells his passengers not to worry that "these are just friendly Thai fishermen." What do they do to the passengers? What is taken from Loung?
- When did Loung Ung leave Thailand for America? What was her dream?

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After Reading the Book -Major Themes of the Book-

The Loung family:

Look at the family chart at the beginning of the book. What happened to each of the children? Write an entry on each person briefly noting what happened to them.

Culture:

- On page 8 Loung Ung is called “ugly” by adults. Why do they do this?
- Look at page 110. Birthdays in Cambodia are celebrated in a different way to those in America. Explain the differences. How old would you be in Cambodia? Do other people celebrate birthdays differently? Do you know of other cultures which do not celebrate birthdays?

Family:

- Loung, Kim and Chou find a “new family” (page 228), or do they? What is a foster family? Loung uses the expression (page 229) “a family of convenience”. What does she mean by this?
- Very quickly Loung’s attitude changes towards her new family. On page 240 she says that she hates them. Why?
- The children leave this family and (page 247) join another new family. Do these people treat them better? Is it really a new family for them? Discuss.

Revenge:

- The theme of revenge occurs throughout the book. Examples will be found on pages 143, 156, 168, 251, 277. In some of these Loung states that hatred is keeping her alive. How? Against whom does she wish to take revenge?
- Is the Angkar afraid of children? See page 159. Why?
- A brutal execution is described in the chapter called ‘the execution’ which begins on page 264. Does Loung experience any emotion? Is this revenge?
- Why did Loung Ung write this book? Is it her revenge? Discuss.

Hunger:

- Food and hunger are a constant theme throughout the book. Explain the role that food, or lack thereof, plays in the tactics of the Khmer Rouge and how Loung and her family try to survive.
- Eight grains of rice may be pasted to a piece of cardboard and passed around the class during this discussion.
- In several instances Loung steals food. See pages 118 and 203. Discuss her attitude to each incident.