

# The New York Times

## Sunday Book Review

**‘Never Fall Down,’ by Patricia McCormick**

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Arn Chorn-Pond was 9 years old when the Communist Khmer Rouge swept into power in 1975, and his story is a catalog of the brutality of the next four years, when as much as one-fourth of the Cambodian population was executed or died of hunger, overwork and untreated disease. It is a story most young Cambodians have never heard, in a nation where the past has been buried along with the bones of the killing fields, a nation whose holocaust is not so much denied as it is smothered in denial. It is also a story that will very likely be new to most American teenagers.

“Never Fall Down,” by Patricia McCormick, author of “My Brother’s Keeper” and a National Book Award finalist for “Sold,” is the latest in an expanding body of books about child survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime who came as refugees to the United States. Their stories are necessarily blurred by trauma and the fragile memories of children, but they have filled a gap left by the extermination, under the Khmer Rouge, of the country’s educated and literate class.

Arn’s story, retold by McCormick as a novel for young adults, tells of the guile, resourcefulness, calculated alliances and, often, cruelty required to survive, and of the lasting trauma that leads its young subject to say at one point, “I am poison” and “I hurt everything I touch.” As a refugee Arn carries his nightmares, guilt and violent instincts with him to the United States, where he learns the healing power of tears and of speaking out — the kind of catharsis many survivors in Cambodia still avoid.

It was music, initially, that saved Arn’s life, when the black-clad Khmer Rouge gave him a flute and ordered him to play revolutionary songs. As others around him died, Arn survived and over time became not only a victim, but also a Khmer Rouge soldier. Like so many other perpetrators of the regime’s violence, he faced a harsh choice: kill or be killed.

Unlike other memoirs about Cambodian survivors, “Never Fall Down” is told in fictional form, based on the recollections of Arn, who recently told me in an interview in Phnom Penh that he entrusted the writer to shape his narrative and fill in the gaps. In an author’s note, McCormick says, “I added to his recollections with my own research — and my own imagination — to fill in the missing pieces.” What she produced is a journey into the horror of those years, told with the ingenuous directness of youth and employing her

subject's rough-and-ready patois. (In her author's note, she likens this to "trying to bottle a lightning bug.") As the story unfolds from atrocity to anguish it gains momentum until, in its final chapters, it becomes a gripping account of the inner turmoil of a child soldier.

This is a book young Cambodians would do well to read so that they might learn, like the Western audience for whom it is written, about their country and the experiences of an earlier, tragically unlucky generation. Cambodian society has produced few works of literature or cinema to digest and interpret the Khmer Rouge years, and until very recently, school textbooks left that chapter blank. Parents often hide painful pasts from their children, and when they try to tell their stories, many say their children refuse to believe them.

A trial of three senior Khmer Rouge leaders now in progress, more than three decades after the killings, only underscores the country's deep amnesia: most Cambodians don't know much about the proceedings. The tribunal has gone only a little way toward producing a catharsis that could at last free the country from its ghosts.

Catharsis is the message of "Never Fall Down," recovery through tears and giving voice to trauma. The book ends in 1984 with a speech Arn gave at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York, during which, for the first time, he found release in tears. Since then, Arn has spoken out in public forums around the world. In 1998 he founded an organization that has since evolved into Cambodia Living Arts, which seeks to revive traditional music that the Khmer Rouge brought to the edge of extinction.

"Tears are for a purpose," Arn told me in our conversation at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Phnom Penh, as ceiling fans turned slowly overhead. "It hurts to talk like this. I have headache and stomachache sharing this story. But telling my story like this heals me. I cry a lot now. I'm addicted to it."