

THE WEEK

Horrors of the Khmer Rouge: only fiction casts a little light

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December 2, 2011

If we can't understand the Nazis and the Holocaust, how can we comprehend Cambodia's atrocities?

THIRTY-THREE years after the end of World War II and its insane crimes against humanity, West Germany was on the road to recovery. Things worked. People had jobs. Cities were rebuilt. The past was receding. They even took part in the Eurovision Song Contest.

Thirty-three years after the Khmer Rouge fled Cambodia, and their crazed genocide (which killed a quarter of the population and wiped out its doctors, teachers, intellectuals and anyone suspected of literacy), the country they raped has nowhere near recovered.

Aids is rife, hunger everywhere, politics riddled with corruption. Families fall apart. In 2008, 32,000 children died of malnutrition. If their population were the same as ours, seven million children - roughly the size of London - would be starving daily.

But what can you do?

You can take action, of course; my daughter visited Cambodia to work in an orphanage two years ago and was so shaken by what she saw that she started a children's care and educational charity, the Safe Haven Children's Trust.

You can also try to bring the past to account, which is why three old men have been sitting in a Phnom Penh courtroom, on trial for crimes against humanity.

If they had done as the prosecution says, they are beyond the reach of any human mercy or understanding. The Cambodian co-prosecutor Chea Leang spoke of women's ears and noses torn off; their livers ripped out alive, then fried and eaten; toddlers' brains dashed out against a tamarind tree; pregnant women buried alive in concrete.

After the indictment, the three old men responded without grace. Khieu Samphan, 80, the Khmer Rouge head of state, said he was a patriot, a mere figurehead. (His lawyer previously represented Carlos the Jackal.) Ieng Sary, 86, the former foreign minister, remained sullen and wordless. Nuon Chea, 85, "brother number two" to Pol Pot, blamed insurgents and foreign plotters.

This, said British co-prosecutor Andrew Cayley, is the most important war trial since Nuremberg. But if we can't understand the Nazis and, in particular, the Holocaust, how much less can we understand the Khmer Rouge and what *they* did?

Read as much as we will, look at as many atrocities and piles of human skulls as we can stomach, in the end we just don't get it.

It's part of a bigger divide. To most of us up here in a little corner of the north-west, the 'Far East' is impenetrable, inscrutable and - outside the tourist-trail sentimentalism of *The Beach* - irrelevant.

If Ian Morris's 2010 grand tour of civilisation, *Why the West Rules – For Now*, is right, the East and West are almost two separate strains, split apart when we migrated from Africa, one lot settling in modern-day Iraq, the other in the Yangtse River valley.

We don't just look different; we *are* different.

Which is where fiction comes in.

Read history and geopolitics and political theory till your eyes bubble and you still won't comprehend 'the East'. But read just one of Colin Cotterill's novels starring his reluctant, septuagenarian Dr Siri Paiboun, the only coroner in Laos, and the mists begin, slightly but significantly, to clear.

Cotterill is a Londoner who represents the gap year gone right. Off he went, and never came back. He worked with NGOs and child protection agencies in southeast Asia and now lives in Thailand.

If a *farang* can get the point, it's Cotterill. His Indochina is filled with tradition, superstition, the make-do-and-mend, the weariness with political experiment, the corruption of politicians, the sheer material poverty of the place.

He has two great tricks up his sleeve.

With *Slash and Burn*, published last month, there are now eight Dr Siri books. Though the settings are grisly, the characters are humane and often funny: Siri himself, his wife, the noodle-seller Madame Daeng; the spotty idiotic Judge Haeng; Siri's mortuary assistants, a tremendously spherical woman and a man with Down's syndrome; an old cynical copper; former communist "freedom-fighters": the whole cast of southeast Asian history is summarised here.

His second trick is that these people speak English. No phony dialect gets between us and his characters. We don't hear what, to our ears, are all too often quacking monosyllables or the furious-sounding clatter of Mandarin Chinese.

So they become human.

And all of a sudden, the three old men in the Cambodia courtroom become, not inanimate turnip-ghosts, but *people*. It doesn't make the Khmer Rouge's horrors any easier to understand, but it does remove a layer of *mis*understanding. Not at all what Cotterill had in mind, I'm sure; but good fiction, of whatever genre, spreads its ripples wide.